

# History of Bengal

by K. N. Bhattacharya



# *moslems of rural bengal*



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# ***moslems of***

A STUDY IN SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND



# ***rural bengal***

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**To Baba and Ma**



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## A Note on Usage

Non-English words are italicized and each word when used for the first time is explained, the convention of adding "s" or "es" to form the plural has not been adopted. This practice has not been followed in case of words that have come into English usage. Major festivals and popular titles begin with capital letters. The religious communities are presented like any other community/social category or group without an "s" after a definite article "the".





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R. K. B.



## Prelude to the Study

Indian rural society is a composite society of communities, of which the Moslem form a significant minority *vis-a-vis* the dominant Hindu. The Moslem have steadfastly maintained their identity in spite of being a participant in this composite society. This composite society can be comprehended as being composed of large or small groups which have distinct identities, often distinct from the dominant Hindu community. However, the dominant Hindu community has been able to explain the presence of these other groups either as originally of their tradition or ones who (mainly tribal) might be brought into the Hindu fold (Risley 1915 : 75-76, 1891 : 506; Radhakrishnan 1965 : 29; Bose 1949 : 22, 1953 : 156-70, 1972 : 12). The Moslem, in striking contrast, have successfully eluded the grasp of Hindu domination, so much so as to stand out distinctly. This startlingly distinct identity of the Moslem has made the Hindu perceive them as "competing intruders" into the resources of the composite society. This becomes even more significant when considering the fact that a large section of the Moslem population of our country are converts from the Hindu. Historical evidence suggests that a fair section of conversion was from the lower Hindu castes over whom the Hindu enjoyed total domination. From this perspective the fact that the Moslem have been able to establish themselves as competing intruders becomes worthy of study. In this relationship of competition/confrontation, these two communities have had to equip themselves to maintain meaningful communication and articulation, especially as they are members of the composite society. The object of my study is to probe deeply into the detail of the process and mechanism of adjustment that the Moslem require for the maintenance of a meaningful contact with their neighbours, as well as their identity *vis-a-vis* the non-Moslem.

The process and mechanism of adjustment that the Moslem require is influenced by the regional pattern of intergroup interactions. These intergroup interactions are based on the social stratification prevalent in the region which forms the basis of stratification found among the Moslem. Social stratification lays down the channels of communication in an organic society either through class or hierarchy. These lines of communication are maintained for economic exchange, intergroup linkages and interactions. In the hierarchic Hindu society communication channels are set up on the basis of relative status of the components making up the society. The Moslem, if at all they can be considered a part of this hierarchy, have a status that is at the lower end. The Moslem ignore this assigned status but paradoxically they do not discount the hierarchy in spite of having an egalitarian ideology. Rather, they feel the need to have social categories which would not only compare to some extent but would be consonant with the Hindu categories. The Moslem evolve these categories in order to enter into interactions with the Hindu on an *assumed* equal footing. Against this backdrop, the most important aspect of Moslem adjustment to the dominant Hindu milieu is social stratification.

Both Ansari (1960) and Misra (1964) have studied the historical and cultural evolution of Moslem social categories or groups without going into the reasons for such developments.

I have studied this aspect of social stratification on two levels : one at the regional level and the other at the level of stratification found among the Moslem. By regional stratification, I mean the stratification which has evolved out of inter-community interactions of the dominant Hindu and the minorities, Moslem and tribal. The ground for major inter-community interactions is the economy.

As regards Moslem identity *vis-a-vis* other communities I have taken the long course of descriptive ethnography consisting of the conventional anthropological aspects such as kinship, rule of inheritance, rites of passage, feasts, festivals and socialization.

If we study social stratification of the Moslem by itself, it might lead us to a partial understanding of these people, and it may appear that the Moslem in a novel way are being engulfed by Hindu dominance. However, a study of Moslem identity will provide us with strong evidence of the working of powerful forces for the maintenance of social and cultural boundaries. What may be considered concessions to Hindu values are rationalized in terms of Islamic tradition. The Moslem boundaries are defined by the ideal tenets of the Islamic tradition. Probing into this mechanism I encountered two models - one ideal and the other the working model. Obviously, the ideal and the working models are incongruent. In this case, especially, the differences have been further heightened for two major reasons: first, the acclimatization to a milieu containing predominantly cultural and social traits of the Hindu; second, the fact that a large portion of the Moslem population sustains within a continuation of the tradition to which they once belonged as converts from Hinduism. The ideal model of the Moslem is explicitly spelt out in their holy text, the Koran, and interpreted in their various Hadiths (schools of thought). Against this the digressions in the working model are discernible.



**1**

***background information***





## *Chapter 1*

### **Field Work and Techniques**

In course of their field work all anthropologists have to face situations for the successful confrontation of which they must develop on the spot, adequate techniques. Here I shall share with you those of my experiences that seem crucial to me. I shall place on record how various field-techniques were utilized in the course of different phases of field work in Birbhum District at different periods between 1966 and 1970.

I simultaneously studied three religious communities, namely the Hindu, the Moslem and the tribal Santal (a scheduled tribe) located side by side in a rural area of West Bengal. The members of these three communities are all cultivators. My field work consisted of collecting data on social, religious and cultural aspects of each of these communities with a view to comparing them.

When at work on the project entitled "Science and Technology in Relation to Cultural Values and Social Institutions in South and South-East Asia" sponsored by UNESCO, I came in close contact with people belonging to the same ecosystem who yet seemed to maintain certain distinctions. Observations of different life-styles gave me the problem for my dissertation. The above-mentioned project lasted for 10 months inclusive of field work, after which I took up an extensive study of the social structure and cultural pattern of the Moslem with whom I had already worked. I spent about three years studying the Moslem of which more than a year was spent in field work

I used the following tools and techniques: (1) participant observation; (2) case studies; (3) survey through schedules and charts; (4) use of genealogies.

### Establishing Rapport

As regards establishing rapport, my attempt was to gain the confidence of my respondents with a view to (1) observing them and their surroundings as closely as possible, (2) collecting information from them, (3) learning their points of view; (4) understanding their behaviour and the situations in which they are placed and (5) getting a feel of their minds

In general, no person can win the confidence of informants without spending adequate time in close contact with them. I feel that for the maintenance of close contact it is not just enough to visit respondents frequently or to stay with them. Overt social and cultural differences between the field worker and the respondent bar close contact. In an attempt to reduce such differences, I tried to make different adjustments. My initial stay was in a dilapidated school building on the outskirts of the Hindu village I studied. In the second phase of my field work, when I had some intimacy with the people, I was allowed to stay with the teachers of the school in their hostel. Later I moved to a mud hut belonging to one of my Hindu low-caste informants and finally I went to stay with a Moslem family. I used to take the food that the villagers normally took. I lived more or less like a villager though not typically, because of the nature of my work (cf. Pelto 1970: 219). As the tribals in my area of study were bilingual, they spoke both their own and the local Bengali dialect and I felt no difficulty in pursuing my field work, but had I learnt the tribal dialect early on in my field work I would have been much closer to them. However, I picked up Santali toward the end of my field work.

The local Bengali dialect, I found, was different from the Bengali that I spoke. Moreover, the Moslem in the area used many distorted Urdu and Arabic words in the dialect, especially while talking among themselves. However, I did not take much time to become conversant with the local Bengali dialect as well as its variant Moslem form - not so much in expressing myself, but in understanding them.

Besides living as close as possible to the people whom I studied, I also tried to present myself to them as a 'harmless' individual ready to extend help (such as first aid) such as was within my means. I treated them as equals (very much from my point of view) with the courtesy and regard that I thought they would expect from me.

I became close to the teachers with whom I lived. Once I was approached to take a few classes in the school. As a gesture of extending help and at the same time getting closer to the children of the locality, I seized the opportunity. It helped me immensely. From my abstract and absurd status of a 'researcher', I was placed in the more understandable position of a school teacher which had a very clear meaning for my informants.

Although from the very beginning I treated the respondents as equals in day to day interaction, I usually avoided flattering them except where I was left without any alternative. In the latter phases of my field work, when I was confident of my established rapport, I became bolder in my attitude in confronting them. Endeavouring to catch informants unaware and get the feel of their inner selves, I sometimes, deliberately, got involved in heated discussions. I expressed my points of view in a frank manner even when I knew that my respondents might disapprove of them. But on such occasions I took special care not to go beyond the limit of my respondents' acceptance which would have jeopardized their trust in me and caused our further converse to become inhibited.

In a socially and economically stratified village community the closer a person becomes to a particular stratum the further he moves away from the other stratum or strata. Members of the higher strata in such communities are usually at the helm of all affairs. All the communities' possible points of contact with the outside world are held by them. Due to this, it is often impossible for a field worker to study any section within such communities before exposing himself to this group. Although the field worker may be working among people of the lower strata, he needs to

maintain good relations with the members of the upper strata as well, at least in the initial stage. Otherwise the latter might bring pressure to bear on the former in order to disturb the rapport that might already have been established.

I did not exactly face this kind of situation. My initial contact in the Hindu village of Bergram that I studied was through a few rich families of the upper castes. During the latter part of my field work I tried to establish contact with the lower castes in the village. This attitude was not appreciated by my former informants of the upper castes who had once arranged for my shelter within the village and introduced me in public as a 'scholar'. They were not at ease with their conscience at finding an educated young Brahman visiting families of low castes and accepting food and drink from them. Further they did not appreciate my close contact with the Moslem. Besides their usual constraint due to their values, they were also afraid that I would talk to the Moslem about their feeling against them, which had occasionally been expressed to me in confidence. On the one hand, my Moslem informants took a long time to overcome their suspicion of me because of my Hindu identity and close contact with the neighbouring Hindu. On the other hand, the poor were not frank in their discussion with me because of my connection with the richer section. However, I got over all these initial difficulties after staying for a long period in my field. Moreover, in the latter phases of my field work I kept myself away from the rich to make my respondents of low castes feel more free in their interactions with me and I partially cut off connections with the neighbouring Hindu in order to win the confidence of the Moslem and to be really close to them.

In winning this confidence the initial stumbling-block is suspicion. To get over this, one requires time and patience and genuine involvement in one's work. During the first few days, or at most a month, respondents might cast suspicious looks at a field worker. After that my firm belief is that the majority of them would get tired of being suspicious of a person busy at work.

### Selection of Informants

I consciously tried to include as many informants as possible of both sexes for conversing or interviewing and observing. I took special care to include children as respondents in order to study the process of socialization and to know the extent of knowledge that was prevalent among different age groups (cf. Sinha 1966 : 189). I took extra care to talk to and observe people who were found to be not very responsive.

I could not, in general, contact women of the Hindu high caste nor those of some orthodox Moslem families. Nor did I make any serious effort to contact them, as I found that the widows or the very old among them were already included in my sample. Besides, on the whole, the number of female respondents in my sample of study was not small.

### Mode of Collecting Information

I have observed in my field that sometimes there are sharp contrasts between what people say and what they really practise. On such occasions empirical data could be collected only through observations. I have written elsewhere how even 'case studies may bring out only what ideally would have happened rather than what actually did happen (Bhattacharya 1967 : 29-32). To illustrate this, I am quoting a few lines from that article :

"Bhakta"-s [i.e. devotees] lay down on the ground making a single line from the place of worship of "Dharmoraj" (a tutelary deity of the village Bergram) to the doorway of the temple. The "Shir Deashi" (the head devotee) lightly kicked each of the "Bhakta"-s as he was going to carry each deity inside the temple. I asked the reason behind this act of the "Shir Deashi" on other "Bhakta"-s. The answer was that actually the "Shir Deashi" was walking on the chests of those prostrate "Bhakta"-s!"

I am quoting another few lines from the same article to be more explicit on the point .

"The Santal, the Moslem and the Hindu of this area say that their children only play and hardly do any work. I have often found these boys working as cow-boys, or the girls collecting leaves and twigs etc. for fuel even while my informants were making these general statements. Their statements do not seem to take full note of the facts happening under their noses '

When I reflect on the experience of my field work I find that it was not limited to collecting a mass of information on conventions of human behaviour. I always made an effort to probe deeply into any problem (related to the major theme of my study), the meaning of which was not adequately clear to me from initial observations. This attitude, as I feel now, developed out of my frequent observations of anomalies, such as that between people's sayings and their practices, between my own 'normal' expectations from different situations and their variations from 'normal' as observed by me.

After my first encounter of the anomaly between people's statements and their performances, I tried to understand the reason behind it *from the point of view of my informants*. I asked them straight, why they did not do as they said. This brought out different versions of *rationalization* which were however not many. Moreover, I observed that some of my respondents became "intellectually involved" in understanding the same problem that I was pursuing. I appreciated this. In all later phases of interaction with my respondents, whenever possible, I took them as 'fellow intellectuals' (Sinha 1966 : 189). I also tried, deliberately, to stimulate them towards getting themselves genuinely involved in intellectual exercises by (1) suggesting contrary and/or alternative arguments against their purported views and (2) making them conscious of the necessary items of knowledge, of which they were either oblivious or unaware, so that they could rethink on their expressed views and concepts. As a general form of approach,

whenever I found it convenient I used these two methods to elicit information from informants.

I may mention here the unforeseen benefit that I derived through my study of three distinct communities (namely the Hindu, the Moslem and the Santal) simultaneously. Instead of looking at a community through the eyes of its members I got a unique opportunity to look again at each of them through the eyes of their neighbours. On the one hand these neighbours were, to a great extent, aware and knowledgeable about the concerned community. On the other hand, they were socially, culturally and in their religion distinct from the community concerned. The contrary and alternative arguments and models that I used to present to my respondents were mostly found ready at hand, in negative stereotypes of them prevalent among the other communities. Sometimes I used to place myself in the position of my respondents in search of suitable alternatives or contrary models. Let me illustrate the above-mentioned processes of drawing out respondents :

Khiruli, the predominantly Moslem inhabited village that I studied, had only one group of Moslems. The village had relatively a richer and a poorer section. These two sections were closely interwoven in terms of kinship. In the Hindu village of Bergram the class stratification of the rich and the poor approximating the broad division between their upper and lower castes ruled out such homogeneity (Sinha and Bhattacharya 1969). The detail of this division between the rich and the poor was as observable as it was between different castes.

I faced difficulty in understanding the detail of the interaction between the rich and the poor in Khiruli, not only because these two groups were often related through kinship, but because Moslem informants, irrespective of their economic class, exaggerated their principle of Islamic brotherhood. They told me that although there were economic differences between them there were no scrupulous social distinctions between the classes. Although initially I took my informants' view as true, I continued

to look for contrary detail in the pattern of interaction.

Once, casually, I proposed to one of my poor Moslem informants that the pattern of interaction between the rich and the poor among the Hindu was contrary to that prevalent among the Moslem. I told him that unlike the rich Hindu the well-to-do Moslem considered their poor as fellow brethren. Although my respondent was an introvert by nature and was usually as insistent as others in unduly magnifying the tenets of Islam, I found that my arguments stirred him. He pondered for a while and pointed out that my understanding was wrong. He told me that the rich among them deliberately try to ignore even kinship ties, if any, with the poor. Further, they are as punctilious as rich Hindus in maintaining their social distance from the poor. As an example he talked about his cousin, a rich villager with whom he overtly kept such good relations that I never suspected that he could hold such an undercurrent of adverse opinion of him. His son, working in the family of the rich cousin, was washing his father's clothes along with those of the family. Seeing this, the rich cousin objected and asked him to wash his father's clothes separately! He further assured me that if I would start hunting for true details of the pattern of interaction between rich and poor, I would find that they were essentially identical in both the Hindu and the Moslem communities.

I am citing below two cases where the minds of children were tapped by avoiding direct leading questions.

In an endeavour to know the extent of knowledge children had on the sacred aspect of life and its impact upon them, I chose offhand a group of nine Moslem children. They were aged between eight and thirteen and included seven girls and two boys. I gave them a choice of one of the following places - Calcutta, Dacca (the then capital of East Pakistan), Mecca and London for an 'imaginary' trip. Eight out of the nine children preferred a visit to Mecca, - the place of pilgrimage for the Moslem. Dacca was a second preference for some of them. Here, by mentioning a few places that they knew or had heard of, I provided them with



options. This helped me to avoid leading questions. On the other hand I could assess the relative importance or emphasis given by my young informers by suggesting adequate alternatives to them.

Once, to get a feel of the minds of those children who were pressed to take up the drudgery of labour from their early childhood, I asked a group of them whether they felt jealous of the children of the affluent classes. Here once again I took a circuitous route to reach the mind. I made them conscious of the large group of children who were very much unlike them.

In the above pages I have recorded how the choice of my field-techniques was primarily guided by an effort to understand the meaning of social interaction and to get a feel of the reactions of the respondents. I tried to cross the threshold of 'suspicion', primarily by staying in the field long enough and also by presenting myself as a 'harmless' person. I also tried genuinely to play a useful participant's role, and I feel that my ability to communicate my deep involvement in the research problem through my activities helped me a lot in establishing rapport. I made a persistent effort to get as many points of view as were relevant in the class and caste stratified societies under study.

After I had crossed the initial threshold of establishing rapport, I gained confidence and, through discussion and controversy, pressed my informants to the point where they could emerge from the camouflage of rationalizations. I have also indicated how simultaneous comparative field work among three distinct adjacent communities provided me with a natural comparative tool for posing questions and eliciting answers. Finally I have described how the children provided an important source for understanding the interplay of values in a community.



## Chapter 2

### Locale

I worked in the Bolpur police station in the Sadar sub-division of the district of Birbhum. The major group of the Moslem that I studied is *Sunni* Sheik and belongs to the village Khiruli which I shall describe in detail later.

The villages that I studied lie along the Bolpur-Sun highway, some right on the road and others more interior and accessible only by foot. A look at the village composition reveals that this region is essentially multi-ethnic in nature. The commonly found communities are the Hindu, the Santal and the Moslem. This locale is predominantly a Hindu cultural zone, characterized by the presence of the above three distinct cultural and religious traditions. The Hindu live in multi-caste villages, which is to say that the Hindu villages contain various castes. Within the village there are sections occupied by people belonging to the same or closely related castes. Thus each section within the village appears to be a unicast settlement.

In contrast to this the Moslem villages are mostly inhabited by not more than two Moslem social groups. Besides, in this region there are no villages occupied only by the Moslem. The village may be composed of an almost equal Hindu-Moslem population, or the village may be predominantly Moslem with small Hindu hamlets. A study of the Hindu settlers in these predominantly Moslem villages shows that they more often belong to the low castes. The settlement pattern of Moslem villages is characterized by closely set houses. The principal landmark of these villages is the mosque. The Moslem of the district of Birbhum are all *Sunni* and belong to two *mazab* (religious schools), locally pronounced

*mujab* - *Hanafi* (or *Hanfi*) and *Ahele Hadis* (or *Ahl-i-Hadish*).

The Santal, in contrast to the Hindu and the Moslem, live completely apart from other communities, though they may be near to or a part of bigger villages which may be multi-ethnic or rather multi-group in composition. They always occupy fringe areas of villages. Their settlement area is referred to as Majhi Para, with the name of the village of which it is a part prefixed. Compared to either Moslem or Hindu villages, the Santal settlement pattern is neatest.

## The Village Khiruli

### Location

The village Khiruli falls within the revenue unit or *mouza* Rahamatpur. Rahamatpur *mouza* consists of two villages, Rahamatpur and Khiruli and a hamlet of Santal locally known as Rahamatpur Majhi Para lying about a quarter of a mile to the east of Khiruli. Rahamatpur is situated to the north-east of Khiruli and is adjacent to it. Rahamatpur is a Hindu village having both high and low castes.

### Points of Contact and Communication

Suri town which is about fifteen miles to the north of Khiruli is the district headquarters. The headquarters of the Block Development Office (B.D.O.) at Sriniketan is only about five miles to the south-west of the village. The Institute of Rural Reconstruction under Visva-Bharati is situated there and the University of Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan is only two more miles away. Kopai, the nearest railway station, lies about six miles to the east of Khiruli; but people frequently board trains from Bolpur railway station eight miles away, as there is a frequent bus service between Bolpur and Suri through the village. The Bolpur-Suri metalled road runs alongside the village. Villagers shop in Bolpur where there are permanent shops and a bazaar. Moreover, there are market days every Thursday and Sunday. There is a

post office in adjacent Bergram, a Hindu village of people from seven of the Hindu high and low castes. The village Khiruli is thus within easy reach of modern means of communication.

### Settlement Pattern

At the time of the study there were eighty households in Khiruli; seventy-one of these were Moslem, eight were Dom and one was a Hari. The Dom and the Hari are Hindu low castes. The village is divided into localities namely Pub Para (eastern zone), Majh Para (central zone) and Pachim Para (western zone). There were thirty-one, fourteen and thirty-five households in Pub, Majh and Pachim Para respectively. The residents of Pub and Majh Para (*para* means section of a village) are exclusively Moslem, but at Pachim Para, beside Moslem, there are Dom and Hari living in the extreme south-western corner. This corner inhabited by Hindu low castes is known as Chhotolok Para (the *para* of the low castes). The houses of Khiruli are rather huddled together. The huts have mud walls and thatched roofs and most of these are two-storied. Some of the huts have corrugated tin roofs. There were five brick-built houses owned by the rich. Overlooking a large pond, the Sutrai, are the most conspicuous landmarks of the village, on the western side the brick-built mosque and on the south-west, the *idgah*, locally pronounced as *idga*, where *Id namaz*, in other words festive prayers, are read. *Id* means festive while *namaz* means prayer. Other smaller places of religious interest are the shrine of Satyapir in the Majh Para, a small thatched mud-hut decorated inside with a few terracotta horses and elephants given by devotees; and near by a Pirer Sthan, an abode of a *Pir* or Saint, in the shade of a tamarind tree. This Pirer Sthan, also built of mud, resembles a grave upon which some of the same terracotta horses and elephants are placed - offerings to the *Pir* by devotees. There are two graveyards in the village. The old one lies close to the *idgah* and the other a little further to the south-east, beyond the settlement there.

### Education

The mosque and a higher or upper primary school adjacent to the *idgah* are the two important formal institutions in Khiruli. The mosque, apart from being a religious centre, is also an educational institution where Arabic is taught in a *maktab* (*maktab* is locally pronounced as *moktab*). The *maktab* is the Islamic equivalent of a junior school and in Khiruli it is attached to the mosque. Most boys and girls of the village regularly go to school. The adjacent village of Bergram has Junior and Senior Basic schools and a High school. Furthermore, Bergram is considered an important centre for rural education in the area. A good number of children from Khiruli attend schools at Bergram.

There is a fair degree of correlation between economic condition of the various local groups and their level of literacy. Hindu high castes have higher literacy.

The literacy among the tribals in the district is very poor (Census 1961 : 88). The low caste Hindu are also very backward in education (*ibid.* : 83). The land-owning Moslem have relatively better literacy. The poor Putua, Momin and Sah are as illiterate as the tribals.

### Population

Khiruli lies in a region dominated by the Hindu. From the census figures of 1961, we find that the total Hindu population in the Sadar subdivision of Birbhum is 1,043,692 as against a total Moslem population of 399,574. The tribals in the whole of Birbhum are only 170,000. Among the tribals the Santal predominate. In the Bolpur Police Division the percentages of Hindu and Moslem are 85.03 and 14.84 respectively (*ibid.* : 49). Of a total 111,950 people under the Bolpur police station the rural Hindu and Moslem are 72,760 and 15,754 respectively.

The total population of Khiruli as given by the Census 1961 is 453. Of this males constitute 245 and females 208. Moslems who

are overwhelmingly dominant in the village number 428. The Hindu population represented by two low castes, Hari and Dom, consists of 25 souls.

### Economy

According to the Census Report of 1961, "The district of Birbhum is pre-eminently an agriculture district . . ." (*ibid.* : 90). The same holds true in my area of study. There are only a few non agricultural occupations to supplement the main source of livelihood of the people. In Tables 1 and 2 the caste and communitywise landholdings and the non-agricultural occupations of the people of Khiruli have been shown respectively.

TABLE 1

#### CASTE AND COMMUNITYWISE LANDHOLDINGS IN KHIRULI IN 1969

Caste or Community	Households	Approximate holding of cultivable land	Landless households <sup>1</sup>
Moslem	71	145 acres	20
Hari	1		1
Dom	8	10 acres	-
Total	80	155 acres	21

<sup>1</sup>The landless households are not all literally landless, but the amount of cultivable land they possess is usually utterly insignificant, especially in relation to the number of mouths to be fed in each household.

The Moslem are not economically well off compared to the Hindu high castes. For example, the Moslem of Khiruli hold approximately two acres of land per household (cf. Table 1) as against nine acres per household among the high castes of the ad-

TABLE 2

## NON-AGRICULTURAL OCCUPATIONS IN KHIRULI IN 1969

Occupation	Persons / families involved	Caste / community	Nature of involvement <sup>1</sup>		Remarks
			Primary	Secondary	
<b>BUSINESS</b>					
Usury <sup>2</sup>	12 families	Moslem		X	
Business in paddy and rice	10 families	Moslem		X	
Business in eggs	2 persons	Moslem	X (1)	X (1)	The number in brackets indicates the number of persons or families as the case may be.
Cloth shop	1 person	Moslem	X		Shop at Shriniketan.
Patkari (dealers in cattle)	3 persons	Moslem		X	



TABLE 2 (continued)

Occupation	Persons / families involved	Caste / community	Primary	Nature of involvement <sup>1</sup>	Remarks
Grocer's shop	5 shops. Four run by four families and the fifth being run solely by a Moslem woman whose primary occupation is grocery.	Moslem	X (2)	X (3)	All these shops are located within the village. Three of them are in Pub Para. Majh and Pachim Para have one grocer's shop each.
Transport	Many persons owning bullock carts	Moslem		X	
Occasional dealers in earthenware	2 persons	1 Moslem 1 Hari		X X	This Hari is also a medicine-man. See below.
PROFESSIONALS AND SERVICES					
Primary school teacher	1 person	Moslem	X		
Lady teacher in a self-run <i>maktab</i>	1 person	Moslem		X	

TABLE 2 (continued)

Occupation	Persons / families involved	Caste / community	Nature of involvement <sup>1</sup>	Remarks
Untrained homeopathic practitioner	1 person	Moslem	X	
Medicine-men	3 persons	2 Moslems 1 Hari	X X	
Dafadar <sup>2</sup>	1 person	Moslem	X	This person is a builder as well as a barber. As a barber he serves the Moslem villagers only.
Chowkidar	1 person	Dom	X	
Builder and Barber	1 person	Moslem	X	
Lorry driver	1 person	Moslem	X	
Lorry cleaner	1 person	Moslem	X	
Amin (surveyor)	1 person	Moslem	X	
Mali (gardener)	1 person	Moslem	X	Employed in Bergram school as a gardener.

TABLE 2 (continued)

Occupation	Persons / families involved	Caste / community	Nature of involvement <sup>1</sup>		Remarks
			Primary	Secondary	
Barber with a hair-dressing saloon	1 person	Moslem	X		The saloon is at the market centre of Parui, five miles north of the village. He serves the villagers without discrimination

# CASTE OCCUPATION

Midwifery

2 persons (women) Hari

X

1 Indicated by the sign "X"

2 Usury, business in paddy and grocer's shops are held in the area more as family business rather than as an individual enterprise

3 Dafadar and Chowkidar are junior police officials in rural areas. Dafadar's position is senior to that of a Chowkidar.

joining Hindu village, Bergram. However, the Moslem as a community are not as poor as the low caste Hindu. The latter as a group and the tribals are the poorest in the area. Low castes residing both in Khiruli and Bergram have landholdings of roughly one acre per household, while the Santal in the nearby hamlet of Debagram Majhi Para possess less than an acre per household (cf. Bhattacharya 1970: 76-80).

### Participation in Agricultural Activities

The local Hindu, especially those of upper caste, avoid manual involvement in production. For the highest and some of the higher Hindu castes, e.g. Brahman, Kayastha and Konar Sadgop (a higher subcaste of the local Sadgop caste) ploughing is taboo. The clean caste women avoid outdoor activities. In fact, most of the high caste Hindu merely supervise their undertakings and leave the bulk of the manual work to hired labourers who are low-caste Hindus, poor tribals or poor Moslems. The Moslem although influenced by the non-manual values of the Hindu, have less aversion to manual labour than they have. However, unlike the tribal and Hindu low-caste women, the Moslem women in general refrain from major agricultural work in the field. The Moslem, unlike the Hindu and the tribal, are relatively free from ritualism in agriculture (*ibid.* 89-91).

Widows, old people and non-residents having no one to look after their agricultural interests usually give their land to others on a sharecropping basis.

### Cultivation : Rich *vis a-vis* Poor

The different communities in my area of study follow the same agricultural calendar and their method of farming is identical. Variations are found mainly in the organization of production and distribution and in the consumption of the produce, in the

attitude of the different communities concerning them and in the ritual connected with them. Within a single community there is generally a sharp distinction between the poor and the rich not only in the amount they consume, but also in the way they distribute their produce and in their method of cultivating it. The rich grow a variety of cereals and vegetables and can afford elaborate and expensive rites and ritual ceremonies.

The rich own most of the agricultural land. They have better draught animals and keep cattle for organic manuring; they employ hired labourers especially to commence and complete the different agricultural processes within a stipulated time period. Although the local agricultural calendar gives a tentative time span for the commencement and completion of each of the agricultural operations, the seasons for these different functions vary with the rains. The well-to-do households can afford to adopt new items and methods in agriculture. They spend a sufficient amount on chemical fertilizers as well as on organic manure. They often plough back some portion of their income for the purpose of improving their holdings. However, an amount is wasted in expensive and elaborate rites associated with different agricultural operations.

The common belief holds that supervised production relieves the tiller of the bother of co-ordinating the different processes in production so that he is free to concentrate on his work, which then progresses more smoothly. However the poor agriculturalists cannot hire labourers; instead they depend on the assistance they give one another. For lack of money the poor do not make use of better seeds and fertilizers and so forth and thus crops are poor. They even cannot afford to keep the draught cattle they require. Quite a number of them hire these animals from those among them who own them. Their poverty, in fact, saps their enthusiasm and initiative. The economically depressed agriculturist works the land in the same way as the rest of the community. He is fully aware of all the aids there are to better production, but he cannot afford them. To him dragging a poor crop from an

exhausted soil is a lifelong drudgery. To the affluent agriculturist using the aids it is a satisfying enterprise. Because of this, the better off, supervising cultivation in their own plots, make far better use of the land than the poor tiller. This holds true both in the case of the Hindu and the Moslem.

### Common Technology of Cultivation

The common know-how of working the land makes it possible for people of any community to work as labourers for any others in the area without special training. The Bengali terms connected with agriculture are similar for the Moslem and the Hindu. While the tribals have different terms in their own languages, they still understand the Bengali terms used by the Moslem and the Hindu. None of the social groups has any special method peculiar to it.

The farmers in the area of study go by the following agricultural calendar (Table 3) :

TABLE 3

### AGRICULTURAL CALENDAR<sup>1</sup>

Months	English equivalent	Agricultural activities
Magh to Chaitra	January to April	First and second ploughing, <i>ugala</i> and <i>samal</i> , are done. At least one levelling is done to the ploughed fields. Nur-sery beds ( <i>bytala</i> ) are prepared and plots for sowing <i>dhaincha</i> (fodder for cattle) or jute are also made. Manuring is also done for the first time.

TABLE 3 (continued)

Months	English equivalent	Agricultural activities
Baisakh to Jaistha	April to June	Seeds ( <i>bij</i> ) are sown in nurseries. Jute and <i>dhaincha</i> are also sown. Ploughing and levelling are done to cover these seeds with earth.
Asadh	June to July	Dikes are repaired. <i>Javar</i> and <i>kadaite</i> , i.e. third and fourth ploughings are done along with levelling. Fields are made ready for transplantation.
Shravan	July to August	Seedlings are transplanted from nurseries to fields.
Bhadra	August to September	First <i>niran</i> (weeding) is completed and the field again manured.
Asvina	September to October	Second <i>niran</i> and <i>pasthela</i> (straightening the bent plants) are done.
Kartick	October to November	<i>Aush</i> or autumn paddy is harvested. Dikes are opened up to drain off any extra water.
Agrayan	November to December	<i>Aman</i> (winter) paddy is harvested and <i>aus</i> is threshed.
Pausa	December to January	<i>Aman</i> is threshed.

<sup>1</sup> In this calendar I have included only one main crop of the area, paddy. Besides paddy the people grow sugarcane, wheat, gram, *tu* (sesame), *khesari* (a variety of pulse), and vegetables like potato, onion, brinjal, tomato and different varieties and species of gourd, etc. After harvesting the *aush* in Kartick, they use the field, having properly ploughed and manured it, for cold weather crops (*rabi* crops) like wheat, gram, *tu*, potato, etc. Gram and *tu* are sown broadcast. Wheat is usually sown in the same way. By April, these are harvested. Sugarcane is also harvested during this time. It is usually sown in the month of Baisakh.

### Working Habits of Various Groups

Although the various communities in the area share the same method of production, they have preconceived ideas about the working habits of the various groups. The high-caste Hindu think that the tribals are no good as cultivators, although they admit that some of them, especially the Santal, are very hardworking. The tribals, they say, do not know the finer points of agriculture. The Hindu also say similar things about the Moslem, although they feel that the Moslem are more intelligent than the tribals. The Moslem hold the same low opinion of the tribals, but consider themselves equal in intelligence to the better Hindu cultivators (*ibid.* . 82).

When it comes to actual performance, however, these fixed ideas cannot be easily substantiated. In the case of the tribals it might be said that they have a less precise system of calculation of the various agricultural activities and are more pleasure-loving (see also Orans 1965 . 7 to 9). Their reputation for hard work may be understood when one sees their energy in bringing virgin land under the plough (Census 1961 . 92). I have already mentioned that the Moslem are relatively free from ritual paraphernalia in agriculture and their rich have no aversion to manual labour.



# 2

***social stratification***



## *Chapter 3*

### **Regional Pattern of Intergroup Stratification**

#### **Stratification as viewed by the Hindu, the Santal and the Moslem**

In the Hindu dominated milieu of the region where each community belongs to a certain social status or caste, and is placed in a hierarchy, the Moslem and the tribals as communities are looked upon as castes or *jat* (*jat* is the colloquial abbreviation of the word *jati*, meaning caste or social group / category or community). According to the Hindu the "caste status" of these non-Hindu communities is a low one. Compared to that of the tribals, the Moslem's status is lower in the eyes of both high and low caste Hindus. I give below the huerarchical pattern as conceived by the Hindu :

Hindu upper castes with Brahman at the top of the hierarchy

Hindu low castes and tribals

Moslems

This hierarchy takes on a basically twofold division in the eyes of the tribals, namely the Santal, who place themselves at the top of the hierarchy. For example :

*Hor.* Tribals or *Hor*. Santals call themselves *Hor*.  
The literal meaning of *Hor* is man.

*Diku*. Non-tribals are known as *Diku* by the Santal.  
*Diku* mean foreigner.

a) Hindu upper castes and Moslems

b) Hindu low castes. Hindu low castes are given a low social status by the Hindu themselves. Under the influence of this the tribals especially emphasize the very low social status of the Hindu low castes.

The Moslem arrange the hierarchy as follows :

Hindu upper castes and Moslems belonging to the  
 status of Sayyad, Sheik, Mogul and Pathan      •

Moslems of Sah, Patua and Momin status and  
 Hindu low castes

Tribals

The Hindu concept of social hierarchy has a traditional as well as an ideological basis. They divide their own society into a caste hierarchy and try to fit other local communities into it according to their presumed social prestige or status. On the other hand, the tribals and the Moslem develop a parallel concept of social hierarchy by living among and trying to adjust their way of life to that of the dominant Hindu of the area. Thinking along the lines of their own very different traditions, the tribals, instead of putting different groups and communities into hierarchies, tend to exclude as foreigner or *Diku* all communities other than their own. Moslems also, according to their traditional way of thinking, tend to extend their egalitarianism to those of their faith and exclude others as *Kafir* (locally pronounced *Kafer*) or non-Moslems. Literally *Kafir* means non-believer, i.e. non-believer in Islam (see below for details).

The different communities view the hierarchies purely in terms of the social prestige each thinks and feels appropriate to itself and to others. The hierarchies perform no functional role of any importance, however, as the different communities do not come into contact with each other socially; they only meet when business or labour transactions are of common concern.

**Categories of Intergroup Stratified Interaction :  
Bhadralok and Chhotolok**

The Hindu who hold most of the cultivable land in this agrarian region have an economic class structure of *Bhadralok* ("gentry") and *Chhotolok* ("lowly"). This class structure, in fact, condenses the complicated and elaborate system of caste structure into a simple twofold economic division. This, however, is not a rigid economic class stratification; poor individuals of high castes are included within the *Bhadralok* class, while well-to-do individuals, if any, among the low castes, are given no special consideration; they are grouped with the *Chhotolok* and are, like them, assumed to be economically depressed. In reality, the *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* stratification is roughly a result of a conglomeration of caste and class. The division runs parallel to the Hindu caste system, where the upper castes are mostly affluent and the lower castes, or *Chhotojat*, in general economically poor. Moreover, the *Bhadralok* have greater social prestige than the *Chhotolok*. *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok* are permanent social groups rather than fluid economic class categories. Although like the Hindu high castes, the *Bhadralok* are expected to disdain direct involvement in manual labour, the *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* stratification, unlike the Hindu caste system itself, has a secular, non-*varna* base; non-Hindu groups are freely included mainly on the basis of their economic strength. Thus :

*Bhadralok.* Hindu upper castes, viz. Brahman, Kayastha, Vaidya, Sadgop, etc., and economically better off Moslems.

*Chhotolok.* Low caste Hindus, namely Bayen (or Muchi), Dom, Hari, Bagdi, etc., tribals en bloc and poor Moslems, especially the Sah, the Jolah and the Patua

The *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* stratification is primarily a Hindu concept. As the various Hindu castes accept their respective high and low positions in society, the low Hindu castes accept their low status of *Chhotolok* in the wider economic division. The tribals, however, although aware of being regarded as *Chhotolok* both by the Hindu and by the Moslem, and although aware of their poor economic position, do not accept the classification.

#### Moslems and Bhadralok Chhotolok Social Categories

The *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* stratification has, to a great extent, influenced local Moslems, especially the affluent ones. I noticed that their seven social groups (elaborated later) roughly fall into two strata resembling the Hindu stratification of *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok*.

- a) The upper stratum (analogous to the *Bhadralok*) includes the Sayyad, the Sheik, the Pathan and the Mogul
- b) the lower stratum (analogous to the *Chhotolok*) includes the mendicant Sah, the weaver Jolah (Momin) and the painter Patua (locally known as Poto. Patua is also pronounced as Potua)

The Moslem groups of higher status do not claim any hereditary occupation and live mainly on agriculture. The Sah, the Momin and the Patua are associated with their hereditary traditional occupations. However, just as many of the different local Hindu castes, having diverse traditional and hereditary occupations, depend mainly on agriculture, so the above Moslem groups are deeply involved in agricultural activities (Bhattacharya 1973: 126).

One can feel the rough division between the *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok* "analogous groups" among the Moslem by the very apparent social distance maintained between the four upper groups and the rest; but interaction between these groups is not built up systematically into a set of hierarchic relationships as with the Hindu. This is because, unlike the Hindu castes, the different local Moslem groups are scattered over a number of villages. The upper and the lower status groups do not usually live in the same village. They are not even organically linked with one another in the joint forging of local economic and social life through division of labour, as are the Hindu *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok*. Another factor which plays a role preventing this *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* sort of division from strengthening is the egalitarian teaching of the Koran. For example, the Sah, the Patua and the Momin who are assigned low social status ignore this themselves, even though well aware of their poverty. They bring forward the argument of Islamic brotherhood and equality as expounded in their Islamic tradition in support of the rationale that all Moslems have *equal social prestige and status*.

### **Baralok and Garib**

The Moslem, however, *economically stratify themselves* into "rich" and "poor". In Khiruli, the entire Moslem community is divided into a fluid economic pattern of *Baralok* (rich) and *Garib* (poor). *Baralok* and *Garib* are also pronounced as *Barolok* or *Borolok* and *Gorib*. This *Garib* section of the Moslem society is often looked upon by the Hindu as *Chhotolok*. Due to this, the Moslem *Garib*, irrespective of their social status, take a firm stand identical to that of the Sah, the Patua and the Momin against *social hierarchy* among the Moslem.

The Moslem of Khiruli are all Sheiks. The *Garib* Sheik of Khiruli, and the other *Garib* belonging to the Sheik, the Pathan and the Mogul of the wider area, emphasize social equality to escape the stigma of *Chhotolok* assigned to them by the neighbouring Hindu community. Incidentally, there are only two families of

the Sayyad in the area and neither of them is "*Garib*". The Moslem *Garib* of the upper stratum voice their ideology of equality only when their social status is in question; otherwise, they have no hesitation in referring to the Sah, the Patua and the Momun as *Chhotojat* or *Chhotolok* in the same way the local Hindu use the terms to specify their different low castes. The Hindu not only class the Sah, the Patua and the Momun as *Chhotolok*, but lump together with them even the poor of the other Moslem groups such as the Sheik, the Pathan and the Mogul.

### **Bhadralok and Chhotolok vis-a-vis Baralok and Garib**

The *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* stratification embodies castes rather than individuals or families. Unlike this, the *Baralok-Garib* stratification is strictly an economic class division. The various local Hindu castes are grouped into a simplified twofold division of *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok*. The stratification, when *restricted within the Hindu fold*, is roughly *varna*-based and caste-styled, recognizing castes as component units and assuring the supremacy of high and clean castes over the unclean low castes. The stratification, however, takes a non-*varna*-based orientation when it extends into non-Hindu communities, as in the case of the Moslem.

The *Baralok-Garib* stratification covers the economic classes and cuts through all group boundaries within the Moslem society here. The Moslem *Baralok* and *Garib* are very often quite close kin. They live together in the same residential zone within a village and forgather for social feasts and religious festivals. They organize religious congregations like *milad* (for detail see later), *urs* (gathering arranged at a *mazar* or shrine of a *Pir*), etc. and participate without discrimination. They use the same mosque for daily prayers and the same *idgah* for festive *namaz*. Their children read together in the Islamic educational centres, the *maktab* and the *madrasah*. However, I have keenly observed that in all this mixing and coming together, the *Garib* adopt a certain deferential



attitude in dealing with the *Baralok*. The *Baralok* inwardly appreciate this deference shown them by their poor brethren.

In contrast, the Hindu *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok* ostentatiously maintain a social distance. They live in separate residential zones (or *para*) in the village. The *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok* differ even in their mode of worship and in their ritual idioms. During the community festival of *Durga Puja* the *Chhotolok* are not allowed to offer flowers (i.e. *anjali* in local parlance) to the idol. They may worship their own household deities of inferior status. Priests, barbers and midwives, who serve the *Bhadralok*, do not or socially cannot extend their services to the *Chhotolok*. With their own set of "degraded" Brahman priests, barbers and midwives, the *Chhotolok* live in their separate world, not only residentially but also socially and culturally (see also Sinha and Bhattacharya 1969 : 61 and 62).

A *Bhadralok* may invite a *Chhotolok* to a social feast, but it is the convention that the *Chhotolok* sits apart from the *Bhadralok*, showing deference to him by not taking food before he starts to eat. The *Chhotolok* is not permitted to invite the *Bhadralok* to a social dinner in his house; however he might send him uncooked food (locally known as *sidey*) or arrange a social feast in the house of another *Bhadralok* where food would be cooked by a clean-caste cook (*ibid.* : 62).

Although in social and religious spheres the Moslem *Baralok-Garib* stratification stands sharply in contrast to the Hindu *Bhadralok-Chhotolok* stratification, yet in the economic sphere the relationship between the *Baralok* and *Garib* among the Moslem is very similar to the relationship between the Hindu *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok*. Unlike the Hindu *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok*, the Moslem *Baralok* and *Garib* are tied by close kinship; but from my observation and investigation, I find that the Moslem *Baralok* ignore, whenever possible and convenient, these close relationships. This they do to better maintain their position with these poor relatives in the economic sphere, especially when the latter happen to work under them as servants or agricultural labourers. This attitude is hardly consistent with egalitarian laws of Islam. However, it is

not the sole instance in which the laws are sidetracked or disregarded, Islamic *shariat* (tradition) forbids usury, but Moslem *Baralok* flagrantly ignore the law by practising usury. As regards injunctions on usuary see Koranic *sura* (i.e. chapter) : 2, *ayat* (verse) : 275-276, 278-280 and *sura* : 3, *ayat* : 130.

### Baralok and Bhadralok

The Moslem *Baralok* have landholdings comparable to those of the Hindu *Bhadralok* in the area. The former are, however, few in number compared to the latter. In Khiruli there are only a few *Baralok* Moslem families, whereas in the neighbouring Hindu villages the *Bhadralok* population is much larger.

Both the Moslem *Baralok* and the Hindu *Bhadralok* enjoy certain privileges due to their economic affluence. They are not only of high social status but monopolize all formal and informal sources of power and influence in their villages and in the surrounding area. They hold most of the offices in the panchayats (village-level political units of administration) and in other institutions like school, library and club. They generally have a hold upon the channels of communication between their villages and outside organizations such as the Block Development and Irrigation Departments of the Government. They are able to afford modern education. They are able to find the initial money to start a business. They live in comfortable and spacious dwellings with comparatively better food and warmer clothing in winter. They take adequate rest, sleep in comfortable beds and lead a relatively regulated life. Besides having every material comfort, they sometimes indulge in extravagances forever out of reach of the poor, such as elaborate rites and ritual feasts on every personal occasion for celebration (name-giving, marriage, etc.) as well as for religious ceremonies and local festivals. With the help of their better financial position, their social prestige, education and so-called cultural sophistication (for the practice of which

they can afford time and money), with the help also of the advantage gained in having access to the channels of communication with the outside world, they widen their connections with people and their knowledge of outside things. This helps them to take advantage of opportunities for all-round betterment of their lot; opportunities often beyond the reach of the Hindu *Chhotolok*, the Moslem *Garib* and the tribal poor (*ibid.* : 59).

### Chhotolok and Garib

The Hindu *Chhotolok*, the Moslem *Garib* and the majority of the tribals are landless and poor. During their boyhood, they either help their parents as extra hands, going with the father to the fields or working at home, or they go to work outside the home as *bagal* (cowherd) or *mahendar* (household servant and agricultural labourer) in the houses of rich people. As adults they are either *kisan* (agricultural labourers on seasonal contract) or *munish* (agricultural day-labourers). Some of them, however, might remain a *mahendar* even in their adulthood. The womenfolk are usually employed only as day-labourers. The Santal women day-labourers are known as *mejhen* and those of the Hindu *Chhotolok* and Moslem *Garib* as *kamin*. Among the Moslem, girls are sometimes employed by rich Moslem families to do domestic work or look after children. They are usually employed for a year at a time (*ibid.* : 61).

In agriculture, as these poor people shoulder the major part of the manual work, they have to be prepared for any kind of weather and to put up with the whims of draught animals as well as of employers. Because of this, they cannot lead a regular life. Their children very seldom can take advantage of even free primary education as they have to help in the house or in the field or as *bagal* or *mahendar* for rich families. Like adults, the children too have no regulated life, and so cannot keep the set hours of school. Some of them play an indispensable role in the economy

of their families. They can hardly spare time for studies. Further, their parents cannot afford education for a long period, especially when they do not see such education bringing greater opportunities for employment. The elders train children in agricultural know-how so that they become efficient in the one sure source of livelihood, agricultural labour. These poor people, as a rule, lack the time and the money to cultivate the finer aspects of cultural life. Their poverty, illiteracy, and low social standing put them poles apart from the *Bhadralok* and the *Baralok*. When they come up against one another in the workaday world, the poor play a subservient role to the Hindu *Bhadralok* and the Moslem *Baralok*, who, in reality, largely control their lives, their thoughts and everything they do because they control the economy of the region (*ibid.* : 61 and 63).

### Interaction and Ideology

Out of self-interest, the Hindu *Bhadralok* and the Moslem *Baralok* do not allow the *Chhotolok*, *Garib* and poor tribals any opportunity to improve their condition. Rather, they try to impose a state of permanent degradation on the poor people. This oppression exercised by the *Bhadralok* and *Baralok* is often masked. However, such behaviour is not always consciously planned; it becomes a behavioural habit (*ibid.* : 63).

The well-to-do Hindu *Bhadralok* and the Moslem *Baralok* disguise the fact of their dependence upon the poor. They claim that they provide for them by employing them. The rich practise usury. They give cereals on loan to the poor during lean months and also loan them cash when they need it. Even after taking exorbitant interest (fifty per cent or more) in kind, in cash or in labour, they look upon their practice of usury as a benevolent act!

The poor are fully aware of their dependence and their underprivileged position in every sphere of life. They are aware that although they form the major work-force they have no control over what they produce. Though they fully understand

the situation they seem to have no desire to take any bold step to change things. A harsh life in which the barest necessities have always been scarce prevents the kindling of any flicker of faith in a bright future. Rather their experience has made them over-cautious and pessimistic. They fear that any move would lose them the little they have. Their choice of occupation is limited when compared to the opportunities open to the rich. They are unable to start a business due to poverty; they can hardly dream of a profession or a post in government service, because they lack education. Helpless and ill-equipped as they are, the basic agrarian economy of the area provides them with the only work they can do, agricultural labour (Bhattacharya 1968 : 83-84; Sinha and Bhattacharya 1969 : 62-63). There is another factor preventing them from protesting or uniting to resist the dominance and exploitation of the privileged class. That is their segmentation into several mutually exclusive castes or groups competing among themselves for status in the eyes of the *Bhadralok* and *Baralok*. A sense of security due to steady availability of bare subsistence level wages from the rich employers also tones down any spirit of resentment. In the case of the Hindu *Chhotolok*, it is possible that the concept of rebirth still enables them to reconcile themselves to a certain extent to the situation in which they are placed. They bear resignedly the strain of their poor life-chances and accept their present deprivation. Similarly, the Moslem concept of *Qayamat-ka-din* or *Hashar-ka-din* (the last day of judgement) brings consolation to the poor Moslem and helps them to bear and accept their situation. There are other such optimistic concepts soothing the minds of young and old. Even young working children would rationalize their hard pressed condition, saying to me :

"God creates rich and poor people so why should we envy rich people?"

The rich enthusiastically promote this sort of ideology. They take a great deal of interest in influencing the poor to make them believe and accept this rationale for their condition of poverty. However, I found that the poor are often aware of the emptiness of these concepts which they themselves use as a balm to soothe their unhappy minds, and which help maintain their unchallenged exploitation by the rich. These half-fed, ill, hungry and tired people do not and cannot revolt against their lot, and they are quite conscious of their inability to do so. They act quite rationally, as far as I see. Through their upbringing they have learnt to adjust themselves to their poverty. Let me quote some of the sentiments voiced by poor children of Khiruli :

" If we do not work, how will we eat ? This is why we work instead of idling or playing. If we work, we can at least buy something for our meal. Besides, we feel uneasy sitting idle ' We are not in the habit of spending time idly, although sometimes we feel like playing and we do play when we get the chance "

The adults assured me that they remembered having spoken like that too, when they were young.

Though the *status quo* is maintained, this state of affairs tends to hamper economic growth and perpetuates poverty. As I have already mentioned, these people are less enthusiastic than the rich cultivators in working hard to raise production because there is no incentive for them to work hard. To a great extent their lack of enterprise is due to their hopelessness. They are conditioned by their social and economic situation to expect and fear disaster if they rashly embark on any change which to others might only seem to offer new and better opportunities (Bhattacharya 1970 : 103).

## Chapter 4

### Nature of Moslem Stratification

#### Tracking the Problem

My understanding of the nature of inter-group stratification among the Moslem of rural West Bengal evolved through three phases of field experience as has already been mentioned (see page 3).

Quite early in the course of this study, I noted that each of the three communities, Hindu, Moslem and Santal, has a distinct pattern of social stratification. The Hindu of Bergram have seven castes arranged into a locally accepted hierarchy. The Khiruli Moslem are all *Sunni* Sheik and within the village they are roughly stratified into *Baralok* and *Garib* categories. The Santal of Debagram Majhi Para are divided into eight *Khut* or clans which are arranged in a traditional hierarchy based on the mythological notion of the order of their first appearance on earth. This traditional hierarchy, however, has no concrete social function. They also have no observable economic class distinction within the hamlet, as they belong predominantly to the class of landless labourers. Within the context of their village the Santal operate as a socially unstratified tribal group (*ibid.* : 78-79).

The Sheik of Khiruli are only economically stratified into "rich" and "poor"; like the Debagram Santal, they otherwise present themselves as a socially unstratified group. In Khiruli the entire Moslem community, in spite of their *Baralok-Garib* division of society, form a homogeneous interrelated social group very like the Santal of Debagram hamlet. In contrast, the Hindu multi-

caste peasant village of Bergram has a more complicated social hierarchy of castes. There the castes are stratified according to a local version of the sacred *varna* system. The seven castes have segmented the villagers into seven endogamous corporate groups which are, to some extent, graphically represented in the lay-out of the habitation within the village. Among these castes in Bergram there is besides a characteristic hereditary division of labour associated with specific caste vocation or *britti*. Specialization in occupation among the castes is undisguisedly furthered by certain social rules inhibiting the high castes from involvement in manual labour and certain agricultural activities (*ibid.* : 75-76).

The castes are more simply stratified into two basic categories: *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok*. These categories closely follow a differential pattern of wealth and power distribution and in this respect they are very similar to the economic class categories of *Baralok* and *Garib* of the Moslem.

In contrast to the above-mentioned situation of social segmentation, the village of Khuruli, with all the Moslem belonging to the single Sheik category, presents an air of castelessness in its society.

In the second phase of my field work I discovered a few Moslem social categories other than the Sheik living in other villages in the area. Not more than two such categories of Moslem live together in any single village in the region. Unlike the Hindu, the local Moslem groups, scattered over a number of villages, lack any regular and systematic hierarchic interaction. Further, the Moslem informants tend to emphasize their egalitarian Islamic tradition, maintaining that they do not divide their society like the local Hindu into a hierarchic order of high and low castes. This claim of my Moslem informants, along with the above observation on lack of systematic stratified interaction, strengthened my earlier notion of castelessness among the local Moslem. I assumed that the Moslem in the area had no internal social structure that could be compared to the structure of caste as represented by the Hindu villagers of Bergram.



During my prolonged stay at Khiruli in the last phase of my field work I became aware that the Moslem over-emphasized the notion of Islamic brotherhood and equality in order to defend their communal solidarity and social identity in the face of the other communities, especially the dominant Hindu. They were successfully hiding their social inequality by the very fact of not having more than two groups in one village. I gradually found that contrary to their claim of egalitarian tradition they too shared an "attributive" notion of high and low concerning their own different groups and have graded them roughly into a hierarchic order. In the following pages I have elaborately dealt with this pattern of social stratification.

One of the major obstacles I faced in understanding the nature of social stratification operative among the Moslem lay in my own method of approaching the field. My endeavour to understand the system of their social stratification in relation to the caste system of the Hindu of Bergram brought some initial difficulties. One was my field situation where different Moslem groups, scattered discretely over a number of villages, do not interact in any specific hierarchical manner. Another factor making it difficult to comprehend the nature of the local Moslem stratification was the consciousness of their tradition, which, as I later found out, made them avoid explicit exposition of social facts which were in contradiction to their Koranic texts and Islamic tradition.

I finally overcame the above hurdles in the course of my investigations. These obstacles, as I feel now, forced on me the creative exercise of exploring the field from as many angles as possible. This many-sided approach led me to change the course of my thought on several occasions. This was to my advantage, however, as these changes in thought, instead of blurring my understanding of the problem, tended to reduce the possibility of getting biased or misled.

I have described in the above lines the different phases of my field experience through which my course of thought changed and developed. Here, in the following lines, I would like to deal

with the subject of Moslem social stratification maintaining the sequence of my findings.

### Hierarchy as Conceptualized

During my informal discussions on the Moslem *jati* system the Moslem at Khiruli mentioned, on several occasions, the existence of four *jat* among them, viz. Sheik, Sayyad, Pathan and Mogul. The division of a caste into four subcastes or *thak* (literally meaning grades) is conventional among the Hindu of the area, especially of the low castes. Some of my Hindu respondents are aware that the Moslem, too, *as a caste*, have four divisions. The Hindu do not however know the relative positions of these Moslem *thak* or subcastes in their hierarchic order.

The Sheik of Khiruli arrange these four *jat* into the following hierarchic order :

Sayyad  
Sheik  
Pathan  
Mogul

In the hierarchy, the Sayyad have been given particular importance by placing them alone at the top by reason of their coming from the direct descent group of the Prophet Mohammed through Ali and Fatima (the Prophet's daughter). The other three groups are not arranged on any rigorously specified rationale. For example, the Pathan are placed below the Sheik; for the latter look down upon the Pathan as they sometimes indulge in drinking toddy (*tari*) which is *haram* or sinful according to Islamic texts. Some of the Pathan grow a moustache and this practice is not considered proper, for if any food or drink touches the moustache and is then swallowed, it is also regarded as *haram*.

I have observed that the topmost hierarchic position of the Sayyad is often compared to that of the Brahman in Hindu society. The Brahman's superior status among the Hindu is overwhelmingly evident to the Moslem. So much so that the Mos-

lem often assign the status of Brahman to a convert who is well versed in the Koran and other Islamic texts, even though his former caste status is not clearly known. It is to be noted that persons having knowledge of the Koranic and other Islamic texts are not frequently met with in rural Bengal.

The Sayyad are in some cases described as Saints or *Pir*. There are two *Pir* families of a single well-to-do Sayyad lineage in Khustgiri in Sainthia police division, a Moslem village ten miles to the west of Khiruli. These Sayyads are the linear descendants of a very prominent local Saint who was supposed to have come of a Persian king's family some generations ago. The superior position of the Sayyad in the hierarchy is frequently defined by the single fact that they avoid ploughing the field themselves. The inhibition about using the plough distinguishes the Brahman, the Kayastha and a higher subcaste of the Sadgop (Konar Sadgap or simply Konar) from other local Hindus (*ibid.* : 76).

The marriage of a male Sayyad with a female of any of the other three *jat* is permissible; but a marriage of a female Sayyad with anyone other than a Sayyad is considered an affront to the "Saintly" people. In this connection I am quoting the view of a Sheik :

" We can give our daughters to the Sayvad, but how could we accept a Sayyad girl [ who is so high in status ] to come and work in our household ? "

However, the rules of intergroup marriage are actually theoretical as there is no empirical evidence to show that the rules are ever put to test.

The Sheik and the Pathan are roughly endogamous groups. There are a few cases of intermarriage and these are rationalized by saying that Moslems are all equal. There is, however, no restriction on intergroup commensality for the males. They eat together, they read *namaz* together using the same mosque or *idgah*. Sheik women maintain that they avoid dining with Pathans. This is verbal and theoretical.

There are only a few Moguls in the area and the Sheik of

Khiruli are not as aware of them as they are of the Pathan Keshabpur, a village at a distance of only a mile to the north-east of Khiruli, has a Pathan population of approximately forty families and these Pathans celebrate *Muharram* (see Table 7) together with the Sheik of Khiruli and Kasba. Kasba is a mixed Hindu-Moslem village adjacent to Keshabpur. Unlike the local Hindu and others of the Moslem population who speak only Bengali, the Pathan are bilingual and speak both corrupt Urdu and the local form of Bengali. The Pathan appear to be physically distinct from the local population of both Hindu and Moslem. They are fairer of skin and better built. However, these distinctive features are overlooked by the people and the Pathan are considered as much a part of the community as the others.

The Pathan claim their status to be higher than that of the Sheik, although they are aware that the Sheik do not concede superior rank to them. However they accept the superiority of the Sanyad in the same way that the Sheik do.

Besides the quadruple system of caste or *jat* among the Moslem, the knowledge of which is based on the verbal statements of my respondents at Khiruli, I personally came across a few other Moslem *jat* during the later part of my field work. They are the Sah (or Sah Fakir), Moslem religious mendicants, the Momin (or Jolah), people of the Moslem weaver 'caste', and the Patua (or Potua or Poto), a 'caste' of traditional artists.

I later discovered that my Sheik respondents also knew about the existence of these other *jat*. The fact that they showed a tendency to avoid any mention of the other three *jat* indicates a barrier of social distance between the four upper *jat* and the rest.

Although the Momin are of the weaver "caste" they do not actually weave and are extremely poor. They originally came from Bihar as seasonal agricultural labourers and a few have settled down in the area. Their women work either as labourers in the field or sell vegetables. The Patua are commonly considered to be half Hindu. The local people, Hindu and Moslem, say that they are in fact a bridge community between the Hindu and the

Moslem. The Patua's anomalous social position is partly related to their traditional occupation. They pursue the occupation of painting Hindu gods and goddesses, which is forbidden to Moslems. The Patua, however, are believers of Islam and consider themselves to be Moslem. Their women are itinerant traders in cosmetics.

At this stage of progress in my understanding of the social stratification of the local Moslem, I found it necessary to extend my field work to other nearby villages in order to contact personally more members of the different Moslem *jat*. Members of the same *jat* in different villages were also interviewed to cross-check information. The bulk of my basic field data, however, was collected from Khiruli. The other villages were not intensively studied. Some basic information on all the villages visited by me, including Khiruli, for the purpose of studying the nature of intergroup stratification among the Moslem of the area is given in Table 4.

In the second phase of field work and after confronting them with my knowledge of the existence of the lower *jat*, I attempted to find out from my informants the position of all the seven Moslem groups in a hierarchic order. I found that they merely added some lower rungs to their hierarchical intergroup ladder and placed the lower *jat* below the block of upper *jat* as follows:

	Sayyad
<i>Jat</i> belonging to	Sheik
the upper stratum	Pathan
	Mogul
<i>Jat</i> of the lower	Sah
stratum	Patua / Momin

The above hierarchy is from the Sheik's point of view. The Pathan would differ slightly in their evaluation. As has already been mentioned, they would place themselves below the Sayyad but above the Sheik. The Mogul (locally known by their surname

TABLE 4

MOSLEM GROUPS IN THIRTEEN VILLAGES IN BIRBHUM DISTRICT<sup>1</sup>

Serial No.	Village	Approximate distance from Khiruli	Moslem groups	Mujab <sup>2</sup>	Approximate number of Moslem families	Economic condition of the Moslem within each village (rough estimate) <sup>3</sup>	Remarks
1.	Khiruli		Sheik	<i>Hanafi</i>	71	Richest Moslem has 20 acres of land. Number of landless families 20.	Predominantly Moslem village with 8 Dom and 1 Hari families. The Dom and the Hari are Hindu low castes.
2	Keshabpur	1 mile north-east	Pathan	<i>Ilanaifi</i>	40	3 rich families hold 17 to 33 acres of land each. 14 to 15 landless families.	Half Hindu, half Moslem (i.e. Pathan) village. Both the Hindu and the Moslem have separate hamlets of their own within the village.

TABLE 4 (continued)

Serial No.	Village	Approximate distance from Khiruli	Moslem groups	Mujab <sup>2</sup>	Approximate number of Moslem families	Economic condition of the Moslem within each village (rough estimate) <sup>3</sup>	Remarks
3.	Kasba	1 1/2 miles north-east	Sheik	<i>I lanafi</i>	25	No rich Moslem in the village. Half the population landless or "semi-landless", i.e. hold 1 acre or less of cultivable land.	Predominantly Hindu village with a Moslem section.
4.	Kendra-dangal (Kennan-gal)	3 miles south	Sheik	<i>I lanafi</i>	100	Richest Moslem village in Belpur <i>thana</i> (police station). 3 families have 67 to 100 acres of land each. Approximate number of landless families 20.	Predominantly Moslem inhabited village with a few Hindu low castes.
5.	Sattor	1 1/2 mile south-west	Sheik and Momin (Jolah)	<i>I lanafi</i> . Momin of the Momin not known to me	50 (Sheik) 4 (Momin)	No really rich Moslem family there. Half the total number of families landless. All Momin landless. Quite a good number of Sheiks involved in <i>Paikari</i> , i.e. trade in cattle.	Hindu -Moslem mixed village. One end of the village Moslem dominated. Hindus exclusively in the other.

TABLE 4 (continued)

Serial No.	Village	Approximate distance from Khiruli	Moslem groups	Mujab <sup>2</sup>	Approximate number of Moslem families	Economic condition of the Moslem within each village (rough estimate) <sup>3</sup>	Remarks
6.	Lohagore	6 miles south-west	Sheik	<i>Ahele Hladis</i> as well as a good number of <i>Hlanafi</i>	63	No rich family. More than one third of the population landless.	Moslem village with a few Hindus of low caste.
7.	Bhera-mari	4 miles north-west	Sheik	<i>Hlanafi</i>	45	No rich Moslem family in the village Moslems of the village more or less economically poor.	Mixed Hindu Moslem village.
8.	Bhola-gore	6 miles north-west	Sheik	Half <i>Hlanafi</i> other <i>Ahele Hladis</i>	80/85	Quite a few rich Moslems have landholding from 20 to 50 acres each Less than one third of the total number of families landless.	Moslem village with a few Hindus of low caste.
9.	Digha Sah Para (the Sah section of Digha village)	5 miles north	Sah	<i>Hlanafi</i>	24	Richest family has 7 to 8 acres of land.	Cf. serial no.10 of this table.



TABLE 4 (continued)

Serial No.	Village	Approximate distance from Khirull	Moslem groups	Mujab <sup>2</sup>	Approximate number of Moslem families	Economic condition of the Moslem within each village (rough estimate) <sup>3</sup>	Remarks
The section, in actuality, is under the revenue village of Dhanai (see serial no. 11).							
10.	Digha	5 miles north	Patua	Hanafi	8	One third of total families of the Patua have 1 acre or less land. The rest are poor, mostly landless.	A big Hindu multi-caste village with these 8 families of the Patua in a cluster within.
11.	Dhanai	5 miles north	Sheik Mogul	Hanafi	6 Sheik families, of which 2 belong to Mallick "subcaste" <sup>4</sup> 2 Mogul families	Moguls are rich; Sheiks poor.	Predominantly Hindu village with a Moslem sub-section.

TABLE 4 (continued)

Serial No.	Village	Approximate distance from Khiruli	Moslem groups	<i>Mujah</i> <sup>2</sup>	Approximate number of Moslem families	Economic condition of the Moslem within each village (rough estimate) <sup>3</sup>	Remarks
12.	Purandarpur	10 miles north	Patua; also Sheik. I did not contact the Sheik.	<i>Ilanafi</i>	6	Patuas all landless	Large village with very old marketing centre, having mainly Hindu trading castes.
13.	Khustigiri	10 miles west	Sayyad Sheik	<i>Ilanafi</i>	2 Sayyad families; 40 Sheik families;	Sayyads are very rich. Sheiks' economic condition unknown to me.	Moslem village.

<sup>1</sup> Villages under serial No. 1 to 7 fall within the Bolpur police station, 9 to 11 under Sainthia police station. Purandarpur and Khustigiri fall under Suri and Illambazaar police stations respectively.

<sup>2</sup> As the two prevalent *mujah*, viz. *Ilanafi* and *Ahele Hadis*, are not endogamous, it is common in a *Ilanafi* dominated village to find a few *Ahele Hadis* living as affinal kin and vice versa, e.g. in Khiruli, Bheramari. The Moslem of the area surveyed are all *Sumi*.

<sup>3</sup> The Moslem are not economically well off in comparison to the numerically dominant Hindu high castes. However, the Moslem as a community are not as poor as the Hindu of low caste. Low caste Hindus as a group and tribals are the poorest in the area.

<sup>4</sup> The Sheik consider the Mallik or Mallick as a "subcaste" lower in status within their *jati*. However, intermarriages both hypergamous and hypogamous are allowed between them. Mallick is also the surname for members of this "subcaste".

Mirza) residing at Dhanai (see Table 4) claim their social status to be higher than that of the Sheik and the Pathan and place themselves next to the Sayyad in the hierarchy, arranging below first the Sheik, then the Pathan and then the other groups in the order shown above.

My single Sayyad informant, who was a sophisticated and educated person (who studied "upto Graduate level" in Calcutta) and was respected as the living descendant of a renowned *Pir* family of the locality, avoided any direct and clear comment on these apparently anti-Islamic, intergroup inequalities among the Moslem. However, in his practical life I found him quietly conforming to these conventional inequalities.

Although begging as an occupation is generally disapproved of among the Moslem, yet they make a distinction between religious and ordinary begging. The Sah's relatively higher status compared to that of the Momin and the Patua is rationalized by the fact that they are religious mendicants. This, however, does not raise their status to the level of the upper four Moslem *jat*.

The Patua and the Momin are considered low as their women do not observe purdah. Purdah is an Islamic custom preventing women, as the local Moslem say, from showing publicly any part of the body other than the feet up to the ankles and the hands up to the wrists. In this area the Moslem normally maintain purdah merely by forbidding their women to work outdoors. The local clean caste Hindu also forbid their women to work outdoors, thus maintaining *abru* (modesty). Upper "caste" Moslem informants argue that the Momin would have had a high social status as "great Moslem" according to the Arabic sense of the term, if they would only maintain purdah. The Arabic word *momin* literally means believer, so each pious and staunch Moslem is terminologically a "momin".

The Sheik and the Pathan have reservations about eating together with the Patua and the Momin, but there is no bar, at least in theory, in praying together.

The Sah, on the other hand, claim their status as just below the

Sayyad. They claim that they avoid ploughing like the Sayyad. In claiming high status they place importance on their distinctive way of life, namely, a highly difficult, dedicated one of religious mendicancy. The concept of a dedicated life as mendicant divines is the central hub around which the Sah develop an other-worldly value system. They, however, feel that they are looked down upon by the high "caste" Moslem. They think that other Moslems have no interest in assessing their deep philosophy of life, considering them not much above the class of ordinary beggars.

The Sheik at Khiruli frequently ridicule the Sah's claim that they avoid ploughing the field. The Sheik told me that the Sah only pretend that they do not plough so as to get alms from the villagers. During my visit to the Sah hamlet at Digha I came to know that the land-owning Sah families of the hamlet did plough fields. They explained away this fact however by maintaining that they were all poor people and it was not practically possible for them to employ labourers to till the soil for them.

The Patua outright refuse to countenance any sort of social hierarchy among the Moslem and claim equality with all others. They explain that the discrimination shown them by other Moslems is due to their poverty. The Patua, however, regard the Sayyad as superior in status to all. They are quite aware that they themselves are looked down upon by other Moslems.

The poor Momin who are not fully settled in the locality voice no protest about the low status assigned them by other Moslem groups.

The Patua, the Momin and the Sah practise endogamy and I could not trace any instance of inter-"caste" marriage among these three groups. However, they verbally express no restrictions on commensality among themselves.

The above is the way in which the various local Moslem groups present their notion of the hierarchic arrangement of *jat*. The different Moslem groups, however, are so widely dispersed that this *very dispersion prevents a constant coming together of these groups to concretize notions of hierarchy.*

The interactional pattern of the Moslem groups in the area is a loose one compared to that of the Hindu. Each Hindu caste has, or is supposed to have, a specialized occupation and the Hindu castes are interdependent. The services of priests, artisans, cultivators, traders, barbers, midwives, washermen, drummers etc. are all caste-based. Although caste services, in practice, are dwindling among the Hindu, ideally the *jati*-based hereditary as well as hierarchic division of labour exists in the minds of the Hindu. In fact, they still visualize their caste hierarchy in terms of this idealized model.

In Bergram, the caste services of priests, barbers, midwives, drummers, blacksmiths and leatherworkers are still prevailing. Except for the services of drummers and priests, who belong to the village itself, the services of the other specialists like barbers, midwives, blacksmiths, leatherworkers are obtained from appropriate castes in the neighbouring villages.

Itinerary artisans like carpenters, bell-metal smiths, traders and also leatherworkers pass through the village and further serve the villagers in lieu of cash or kind. Some of these artisans and traders come from as far as the neighbouring districts of Burdwan and Murshidabad. However, most of them are from Bolpur and Suri towns and from the market centre of Purandar-pur.

The interaction of the different Moslem *jat* of the area is not as elaborate and interdependent as that of the local Hindu. In fact the number of Moslem groups, which is only seven, is too small for the local Moslem to divide their community in terms of *jati*-based hereditary divisions of labour to any great extent.

By considering the settlement pattern of these Moslem *jat* and their numerical strength we can briefly conclude that they cannot possibly have had an elaborate "caste" system. Marriot writes that population density and settlement pattern are important determinants for the elaboration of "caste" ranking (Marriott 1960). By population density he means a large number of groups.

As the local Moslem lack an elaborate *jati*-based hereditary division of labour, they use the Hindu arrangements for their own limited purposes. For instance, the Hari midwife of Khiruli serves local Hindu clients as well as the Moslem. However, she does not serve the Dom and the Bayen (Muchi) of the locality, as these two castes are assumed to be lower in the hierarchy than the Hari.

The Hindu of Bergram and the Moslem of Khiruli get their agricultural implements made by the Hindu Kamar (blacksmith) caste of which there are two families living in Radhakestapur village (situated west of Khiruli). The local people, even the tribals, get their utensils and farming implements made and repaired by these blacksmiths.

Itinerary leatherworkers of the Hindu Muchi caste, bell-metal smiths of the Hindu Kansari caste etc. also visit all villages and serve all the villagers without discrimination.

In Rahamatpur, a multi-caste Hindu village, a Bayen who pursued his traditional craft as a leatherworker was often visited by Moslem villagers from Khiruli who brought him pieces of goatskin, especially when goats had been ceremonially slaughtered, to be made into covers for *mora* (stools made of split bamboo).

The local Moslem as a community, on the other hand, are regarded as dealers in cattle and this particular trade is more or less their monopoly.

### General Components of the Hierarchy

In spite of having only a partially developed system of "caste", the Moslem have quite a number of features strikingly similar to Hindu caste features, such as endogamy, restriction on commensality and vocational heredity. In this discourse I shall expound the relevance and the significance of these features in the intergroup hierarchy of the local Moslem.

### Endogamy

Like the Hindu castes, the Moslem groups of this area are endogamous, that is, they marry within the group. In Khiruli no marriage had taken place across group boundaries within living memory according to the villagers. This was verified from genealogies I traced.

The local Moslem with the surname Malick claim to be within the Sheik group. In answering my query regarding the social status of the Malick my Sheik informants said:

"The Malick are Sheiks, no doubt. The Malick and the Sheik belong to the same *jat*, but they (the Malick *jat*) are of a lower (social) status."

From the Sheik's point of view the Malick appear to be a "sub-caste" within the Sheik *jat* or group. There have been some marriages between the Sheik of Khiruli and the Malick of Dhanai and of other villages which may be considered hypogamous, that is, marriages between persons belonging to the same group though of different social standing, where the woman is the one of higher social standing.

In the village Sattar there was a case of intermarriage between a Jolah woman and a Sheik, and two Pathans of the Keshabpur village had each married Sheik women. The local Moslem, however, unlike the Hindu of the area, do not categorically decry such unions. With the help of their Islamic egalitarian view, they attempt to rationalize the breach of endogamy. However, in day to day social interaction such unions are considered, to some extent, socially degrading to the spouses of the higher status group involved in such unions. In any case, intergroup marriages seldom take place and thus these local Moslem *jat* may conveniently be regarded as endogamous units.

### Restrictions on Commensality

The Sheik of Khiruli informed me that while their male members have no objection to taking food with the Pathan, neither their men nor their women would dine with the Patua or the Momin. This statement was confirmed by some Moslem women of Khiruli. Later on I came to know from a few Sheiks of Sattor that they did not dine with their Momin neighbours either.

The Sayyad and the Mogul indirectly admit that they would not dine with the Patua or the Momin or the Sah. They rationalize this restriction on commensality by saying that it depends on one's personal taste (*ruchi*). This is the usual way of rationalizing social behaviour which is not wholly compatible with the Islamic tradition.

The Sayyad, the Sheik, the Pathan and the Mogul maintain that the Patua and the Momin are poor and thus cannot afford cleanliness. They lack all hygienic sense and it would make one sick if one dined with them. On the other hand, I have observed the well-to-do Sheik of Khiruli taking food with poverty-stricken Sheik families no less poor and unclean than any Patua or Momin. In other words, their inconsistency seems to suggest that the sense of hygiene or cleanliness in a person is correlated to his social position or status rather than to his economic condition or even to the fact of his being clean or hygienic. To a certain degree this notion of hygiene correlated to social position provides indirect evidence of the existence of a concept of purity and pollution in their intergroup relationships. In fact, some Sheik informants of both sexes described the Patua and the Momin as low castes in the same sense of the phrase that the local Hindu used to specify their different low castes, e.g. *Chhotolok* or *Chhotolat*. Similarly the Sheik of Khiruli consider the Moslem who belong to lower social groups as *Chhotojat*. For example, during a discussion of different Moslem *jat* and their social status, a Sheik woman of Khiruli said "The Patua, the Momin or the Jolah belong to *Chhotojat*". Further the Khiruli Sheik, in general, maintain that



they do not dine with the Patua and the Momin simply because they are low.

From this study on commensality we find that the Moslem in my area of study usually try to rationalize the restrictions on commensal relations between their different groups by emphasizing hygienic sense and personal liking (*ruchi*); but undeniably they have a concept of purity and pollution. However, their concept of purity and pollution is not related to any sacred theme in their tradition.

### Occupation

The upper Moslem *jat* do not claim any hereditary occupation. They live mainly on agriculture. The Sah, the Momin and the Patua are associated with their traditional caste occupations of mendicancy, weaving and painting respectively. However, just as many of the different local Hindu castes, although they have diverse traditional and hereditary occupations, depend mainly on agriculture, so these Moslem *jat* are also deeply involved in agricultural activities.

The Sah and the Momin regard their traditional occupations as worthy. The Patua, however, feel embarrassed to admit that they are traditionally involved in painting Hindu gods and goddesses. They do not like disclosing this vocation of theirs, for they know that their occupation lowers their social prestige in the eyes of fellow Moslems.

The occupations of the Sah, the Patua and the Momin however are all considered inferior by members of the upper four Moslem "castes" or *jat*. These different lowly occupations are categorized into different degrees of lowliness by the Moslem. The upper "caste" Moslem give the hereditary occupation of the Sah, religious mendicancy, a relatively higher status than the occupations of the Patua and the Momin. The Patua's disreputable occupation of painting Hindu gods and goddesses is graded lowest by all the other Moslem. The Patua themselves are aware of their occupational status being the lowest. For convenience, I am arranging below

the hereditary and traditional occupations of the Moslem groups assigned low status according to the order in which the high "castes" place them.

Traditional occupation	Group hereditarily and traditionally related to occupation	Relative status of occupation
Religious mendicancy	Sah	Comparatively higher
Weaving	Jolah (Momin)	Low
Painting	Patua	Lowest

Although occupationally the Patua hold the lowest status, actually their social status is locally considered equivalent to the Jolah. This is because the indigenous Patua are of superior economic condition and numerical strength in comparison to the few non-indigenous and extremely poor Jolah, and thus have more influence over local Moslem society. Moreover, unlike the Jolah, who being external to the region are rather reticent, the Patua are vocal in claiming a higher social status.

It would not be irrelevant to point out here a convention governing any person belonging to the four higher Moslem *jat* who has a servicing occupation. It is required of him that he does not extend his service to the so-called low-"caste" Moslem, namely the Patua, the Momin and the Sah nor to the Hindu low castes. However, my information on this point is based on only a single case study :

An old Sheik, who expected soon to go on the hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca) and was thus supposed to be an ardent follower of Islamic tenets (one of the tenets being egalitarianism), complained to me that a Sheik of Khiruli who had a hairdressing saloon in the market centre of Parui (five miles south of Khiruli under Sainthia police station) must have clipped the hair of people belonging to both the Hindu and Moslem low *jat*, unlike

the behaviour of another Sheik of Khiruli, a builder of mud homes and also a barber, who did not extend his service to any low Hindu or Moslem *jat*.

Before concluding I would like to add that, like the Hindu, a Moslem usually acquires the social status of a particular group by birth or by adoption and the status descends patrilineally.

### **Operational Model Devised for Intergroup Social Hierarchy**

In spite of the existence of the above-mentioned caste features in their intergroup stratification, the local Moslem in general virtuously deny the existence of these features among them. These features are looked upon by them as Hindu caste features. The Moslem are very particular in emphasizing the difference between themselves and the Hindu in order to maintain their social identity and cultural boundaries. They think that by admitting the existence of locally accepted Hindu features among them they would be indicating the basic similarity of their society to that of the Hindu, thus putting in jeopardy their distinct social identity. Further, due to lack of frequent interaction among their different local groups, they can ignore these features of stratification, which only thrive on the basis of close and continuous intergroup interaction. They cannot escape, however, the undeniable and observable fact that the different Moslem groups are not on an equal footing within local Moslem society.

The Moslem prefer to explain these observable inequalities in status in terms correlated to their Islamic tenets. In fact, they are in search of a model of their own to justify these inequalities. These inequalities, which conflict with their Islamic ideal model of an egalitarian society, place them in a mental dilemma. They try to overcome the state of mind caused by this sharp contrast between their ideology and practices by rethinking the undeniable social fact of status inequality, covering it with suitable idioms that relate adequately to their tradition. However, we shall find that even their idioms are inadequate to explain away their social

hierarchy.

### Purdah

The Sayyad, the Sheik, the Pathan and the Mogul deny having equal status with the Sah, the Patua and the Momin on the ground that the women of the latter groups, especially the Patua and the Momin, do not observe purdah. However, I observed that even the upper four Moslem *jat* often could not maintain purdah in its strict sense. My informants stated that those who strictly observed purdah, for example the Sheik of the village Kendradangal, tried to avoid marriage with families following less purdah, such as the Moslem of Khiruli. Indeed I found no marital union between the Moslem of Khiruli and Kendradangal, although they are close neighbours.

It seems that observance of purdah depends on one's economic condition. In rare cases, however, the poor Moslem are pressed to keep purdah by the numerically and politico-economically powerful Moslem within a village, who adhere to purdah.

The Sheik of Khiruli, Lohagore and Bheramari villages (Table 4) contend that they cannot afford to follow purdah strictly because they are poor. Indeed if a person wishes to fully adhere to the rules of purdah, he must necessarily put walls around his homestead and arrange for washing and toilet facilities within their confines, so that the women of the family, while maintaining purdah, can lead their day-to-day life comfortably. The majority of Moslems cannot afford to observe purdah in this strict sense. In Khiruli, a middle-aged woman, who claims (and others support her claim) that she keeps purdah like other purdah-keeping women of the village all the same runs a small grocer's shop. There is another old lady in the village who frequently looks after the grocer's shop run by her family. These deviations of the upper *jat* are overlooked, while the disobedience of the rule of purdah by the lowly Patua and Momin women is over-emphasized.

Like the Sheik of the different villages mentioned above, the Patua and the Momin say that they are too poor to afford purdah.

### Paksaf

Another reason for the Moslem of the four upper *jat* assigning low status to the lower three *jat* is that the members of the latter do not conform to certain other Islamic rules. According to the upper four *jat*, these Moslems of the lower three do not perform ablutions after urination and thus generally do not maintain *paksaf* (locally pronounced *paksak*) or purity according to Islamic tradition. By *paksaf* the local Moslem mean physical purity or cleanliness. From my personal observation I found this concept of the upper four *jat* regarding the lower ones mostly a popular bias. This is comparable to another such prejudice prevalent among the upper *jat* Moslem that those of the lower three groups do not regularly say *namaz*. However I observed that the majority of Moslems, whichever *jat* they belonged to, upper or lower, neglected to pray according to Islamic *shariat*.

The above rationales devised by the Moslem help us to understand the twofold social stratification into higher and lower Moslems, although they do not explain clearly the reasons for the further division into seven groups. While endogamy in general is practised by all Moslem groups, the theoretical rule of hypergamy permissible between the Sayyad and any of the local upper Moslem groups draws a precise dividing line between the two strata. The aversion to commensal relations between upper and lower strata also indicates this dividing line. The local upper stratum Moslem inter a disregard for the rules of *purdah* and *paksaf* on the part of the lower stratum Moslem.

What I intend to point out is that the hierarchic relation between a Sheik and a Jolah, that is between persons of higher and lower strata, has clearly delineable features not existing between a Sheik and a Pathan, members of different groups in the same stratum. Like the Hindu *Bhadralok Chhotolok* stratification, this easily perceptible twofold division of the Moslem into upper and lower blocks of *jat* is determined on the basis of a combination of several factors. Each group is assessed on social status, economic

condition (in terms of landholding), position in the local power structure and the degree of literacy (Sinha and Bhattacharya 1969).

### Wealth and the Social Hierarchy

It is observable that wealth has a direct correlation with the assessment of the relative positions of different *jat* in the hierarchy. In the area studied the Sayyad are the richest. The Sheik, the Mogul and the Pathan together come next in wealth and the Sah, the Jolah, and the Patua are the poor. However, wealth is not the sole determinant of social status, for there are quite a good number of Sheik, Pathan and Mogul whose economic condition is no better than that of the Sah, the Patua and the Jolah. These people along with the Sah, the Patua and the Momin are often distinct in their way of life from the affluent of their own groups as well as from those of other groups. They are frequently illiterate, belong to the agricultural labouring class, live in wretched huts and do not observe purdah.

Sometimes the possession of wealth is over-emphasized by Moslems in determining status. They quote the popular Persian saying : "Last year I was a Jolah; this year I am a Sheik; next year if prices rise I shall be a Sayyad" (translation adopted from Barth 1960 : 130). They also hint that nowadays Moslems of high social status marry rich Moslems belonging to low social groups. These assertions are often no more than mere verbal statements and are not corroborated by any actual occurrence.

Although the hierarchy of different *jat* among the Hindu and the Moslem in the area has a high correlation with class stratification, this correlation is generally heightened by both the Hindu and the Moslem over and above its actual existence. Thus all high *jat* are considered well-to-do, and all low *jat* poor (*ibid.*).

It is to be noted, however, that the rich Moslem have greater opportunity to confirm their social status by such activities as visiting Mecca and becoming a Hajji, by going on the Hajj; giving appropriate *fetra* (explained below) and *zakat*; distributing *wasar*

and donating to madrasah. *Zakat* is two and a half per cent of the value of the property of a rich man (*maldar*), including land, house, ornaments and yearly surplus wealth, which he customarily gives to the poor and orphans. *Wasar* is one-twentieth part of his crops, which he distributes in the same way. A rich Moslem can also enhance his social prestige by arranging *milad* (minor religious "congregations") or by feeding *musalli* (those who come to pray at the mosque). This sort of feasting is locally known as *musalli*.

### The Moslem Social Hierarchy *vis-a-vis* the Hindu System of Caste

So many mythological, traditional and religious themes are involved in the Hindu system of caste that one initially feels somewhat hesitant in comparing Moslem intergroup stratification with the Hindu hierarchy of caste. Unlike the Hindu, who prevent low castes from directly performing certain rites and rituals, the Moslem, high and low, can enter the mosque (provided their clothes are clean) and read *namaz* standing shoulder to shoulder in the same line (locally called *katar*); not even the highest would mind standing behind a Jolah or a Patua or a Sah who happens to come first and stands in front.

Like free entry to the mosque, *maktah* and madrasah are open to all. If by dint of perseverance and merit a low Moslem becomes a mullah (Moslem theologian) and conducts *namaz*, even the highest Sayyad would not begrudge it, but would unhesitatingly agree to read *namaz* led by him, considering him an imam (person who conducts *namaz*). Even so, in a gathering for *namaz*, Moslems of low social order usually try to avoid standing in front lines. Further, I observed that an old Sheik of Khiruli, finding the behaviour of a newly-appointed *khatib* (officiating mullah of a village mosque) somewhat unpolished, slightly referred to him in his absence as a Jolah.

The fundamental difference between the Hindu caste system and the Moslem social hierarchy is that the former is based on the traditional Hindu system of *varna* while the latter has no systematic mythological or theological basis. Further, the egalitarian concept

of Islamic brotherhood (cf. Koran, chapter : 21, verse : 92) contradicts any social arrangement in terms of intergroup stratification. Moreover, each Hindu caste or *jati* has, or is supposed to have, a specialized occupation, while the four upper Moslem *jati* are not associated with any specific "caste" service.

### Do the Moslem have Caste

The Moslem in their interaction operate very much like the local Hindu in a *jati*-based hierarchy; this hierarchic model of the Moslem is not a product of their tradition. The Moslem social hierarchy that I studied is a "situational" one, while the Hindu social hierarchy of castes is basically a traditional system. Further, this situationally derived hierarchy is inconsistent with the Islamic view of the ideal social life. This disharmony between ideal social life and the one practised causes much confusion in the minds of the Moslem in explaining the reality of their social hierarchy. Because of this, instead of considering their intergroup stratification as a normal social condition, they take pains either to deny or to rationalize it.

In practice, however, the different Moslem groups of the locality keep a social distance between each other by practising certain Hindu caste usages like endogamy and restrictions on commensality. Besides, each of the three local Moslem groups of lower social status has, or is supposed to have, a specialized hereditary occupation. In an attempt to maintain status discrimination within their different groups, the local Moslem have devised certain special rationalizations. Considering all this, the non-*varna*-based, situationally derived, intergroup stratification of the Moslem in my area of study may be regarded as a system of intergroup stratification analogous to the Hindu system of caste.



# 3

***social organization of islam***



## Chapter 5

### Kinship

The Moslem are identified locally as a distinct community by their religion. The practices of their religion are highly codified in their sacred books, the Koran and the Hadith, the Islamic book of law. This codified version is the ideal model for Moslems to follow. A study of the social organization prescribed by Islamic tradition will help us to see how this ideal model is being followed by the Moslem in this particular locality.

An examination of Islamic practice reveals that there are certain agents, or more specifically a group of Moslem theologians, who are educated and trained in special institutions like madrasahs; and who through a set of institutions including the madrasah constantly indoctrinate the followers of Islam into the ideals and codified rules of their religion. The followers try to maintain these ideals and rules, at individual, family, village and community levels, through a host of socio-religious institutions and through feasts and festivals prescribed by their religious doctrine. Not only their special agents, but also the natural process of socialization inside the society as such, makes Moslems individually and at each level conscious of their tradition and its practices. It makes them conscious of the body of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of their society and helps them to differentiate their own religious practices from others in the area. Their distinctive identity *vis-a-vis* other communities and religions (especially the dominant Hindu and Hinduism) seems strengthened by a knowledge of the extralocal existence of their kind. This consciousness formally comes to them through their knowing the

history of the origin and spread of their tradition. Certain institutions which maintain their sacred tradition also make them aware of this extralocal existence of their kind. Informally they are assured of this by means of modern channels of communication particularly transistor radios.

In this section I shall only be concerned with the organization of the tradition of Islam in so far as it helps the Khiruli Moslem in the maintenance and practice of their religion, and also in so far as it fosters a socio-religious image of themselves *vis-a-vis* the dominant Hindu.

There are no clans among the local Moslem. Although their descent is patrilineal as in the case of Hindus, awareness of lineage is very limited. This is mainly because there are no Moslem or rather Islamic rules which give prominence to it. Their lineage boundaries, moreover, are tenuous because of "lineage endogamy".

The distinctive pattern of their kinship is related to the special rules for marriage given in the Koran. These, however, specify only those relatives with whom marriage is not lawful. Therefore, marriage between the unspecified relatives is considered legal.

The prohibited degrees in marriage as given in the Koran (*sura* : 4, *ayat* : 23) conform to those which, barring minor detail, are usually accepted by all Moslems. The list is drawn up on the assumption that the person who proposes to marry is a man. If the person is a woman, the same scheme applies with appropriate changes in terms of relationship.

According to the rules a man is prohibited from marrying his (1) mothers, (2) daughters, (3) sisters, (4) father's sisters, (5) mother's sisters, (6) brother's daughters, (7) sister's daughters, (8) foster-mothers (who suckled him), (9) foster-sisters, (10) wife's mothers, (11) stepdaughters and (12) son's wives.

According to Islamic theologians "mother" includes grandmother (through the father or mother), great grandmother, etc. "daughter" includes granddaughter etc. and "sister" includes

full sister and half-sister. "Father's sister" includes grandfather's sister etc., and "mother's sister" likewise includes grandmother's sister etc. "Son" includes grandson, but excludes adopted son, or a person treated as such.

Fosterage or "milk-relationship" plays an important part in Moslem law and counts as a blood relationship. It would therefore seem that according to the theologians not only foster-mothers and foster-sisters, but foster-mother's sisters etc., all come within the prohibited degrees.

Whenever there is any controversy regarding these rules of marriage, the Moslem consult their specialists, viz jurists (or *kazi*) for just arbitration. In the area where I worked, the *maulavi* or any person well versed in Islamic rules usually did the job of a *kazi*. This shows us how important the role of Moslem specialists is in maintaining a distinct social system among them.

The Koranic rules stipulate that Moslem men can marry either within the community or with the "people of the Book", i.e. the Jew and the Christian (see *sura* : 5, *ayat* : 6 in the Koran). Moslem women, however, are prohibited from marrying outside their community.

The rules in the Koran further stipulate that in establishing the marriage tie with a woman, her faith (obviously in Islam) is to be taken into consideration, but not her social position. Thus, a Moslem is allowed to marry even with a servant provided she is of the faith, but not to a person of a different faith (*sura* : 2, *ayat* : 221). However, the local Moslem do not strictly conform to this rule. Their society is stratified into several endogamous groups. Some of these groups are considered socially low and others high, with yet more ranked between. The Sheikh Moslem of Khiruli are a category by themselves, as are the Sayyad, the Mogul, the Pathan, the Sah, the Patua and the Momin.

In Khiruli I found no breach of group endogamy. In fact there are only very few unions even in the surrounding villages that bridged different endogamous groups. As the unions are not textually prohibited they are not socially condemned by the

respective groups. On the other hand, they are not held in great favour either, and so do not happen very often.

The rules, in general, prohibit marriage between kin belonging to different generations. Within the same generation only marriage between brother and sister is prohibited.

In the area of study, the Moslem are known for their marriages between parallel cousins. They maintain that they marry such close kin (parallel or cross cousins) mainly to avoid disputes which might otherwise arise over inheritance of property; for according to Islamic rules women also inherit prescribed portions of property from specified kin such as parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, husbands and children.

During my stay at Khiruli I traced twenty-nine close-kin marriages among the Moslem villagers. Of these, sixteen were first cousin marriages (see Table 5) and six were cousin marriages twice or thrice removed.

TABLE 5

TYPE OF COUSIN MARRIAGES  
AMONG THE MOSLEM AT KHIRULI

Number of parallel cousin marriages		Number of cross cousin marriages		Remarks
Father's brother's daughter (FBD)	Mother's sister's daughter (MSD)	Father's sister's daughter (FSD)	Mother's brother's daughter (MBD)	
9	1	4	2	First cousin

An analysis of marriage ties among the Moslem at Khiruli shows us that twenty-one percent of marriages were between

close kin, including sixteen percent between cousins

Of all the existing marriages (total one hundred), eighteen were between individuals of the same village. Fourteen of these were between close kin and the rest between unrelated individuals. These findings are based on genealogies taken in 1969 covering all Moslem families at Khiruli. Although matrimonial ties are frequently made between unrelated persons, there is an observable frequency of marriage between close kin among these Moslems. This primarily differentiates them from the local non-Moslem who deem such marriages incestuous.

Cousin marriages have naturally complicated certain roles such as those of paternal and maternal uncles and aunts, of nephews and nieces and of cousins.

An analysis of terms of address and reference shows that the Moslem, after marriage between close kin, do not appropriately change all their terms of address. They maintain the consanguineal terms of address and often the terms of reference too. For instance, even after marriage between parallel cousins, father's brother and his wife, are called *chacha* and *chachi* respectively (*chacha* meaning father's brother and *chachi* father's brother's wife), although ordinarily *abba* is the appropriate term of address for a father-in-law and *ma* for a mother-in-law.

In a marriage between parallel cousins through the mother's line, mother's sister is called *khalu* and her husband *khalu*. Both are consanguine terms. The same rule is observed in relation to terms of address in the case of marriage between cross cousins, where the father- and mother-in-law are not addressed by the terms which the marriage might have given them.

When there is little prospect of a marriage between parallel cousins or cross cousins, the roles of kin such as paternal and maternal uncle and aunt, nephew and niece and cousin do not become complicated, yet when there is an actual affinal tie between cousins or the prospect of one in future, the roles of the above relatives become loaded with additional rights, duties and responsibilities. A *chacha* or a *mama* (mother's brother) takes

additional interest in the well-being of a nephew or a niece when he or she is considered as a prospective groom or bride of his daughter or son. Similarly the *phuphu* (or father's sister) or the *khala* (mother's sister) also becomes involved in the welfare of the nephew or the niece about to be brought closer by marriage. A negotiation or an understanding between relatives normally precedes the involvement of the above-mentioned kin in the welfare of their nieces and nephews who are about to come closer by marriage. The relatives referred to above have to keep on good terms with the parents of a prospective groom or bride. After marriage relations do not always remain cordial. They sometimes become strained as a result of disputes connected with the sharing of property. Among the poor such disputes rarely occur. They more often than not have a mutual understanding that in their poverty-stricken condition there is little justification for disputes over property. Relations between such parties involved in close affinal ties might become "indifferent" but could hardly be termed strained.

Cousin marriages are sometimes arranged by a method of exchange. Two siblings of opposite sexes are given in marriage to their cousins who in their turn are brother and sister. There are a few such marriages at Khiruli.

In an extended family, a nephew maintains the same social distance from his paternal uncle as he maintains with his father, and so does a niece. If the uncle and his nephew or niece belong to the same age group, their relation approximates that between siblings. Father's elder brother is sometimes called *bara chacha*. The term *chacha*, however, includes father's younger as well as his elder brother. The relationship of a nephew or of a niece to the *chachi* is generally that of a son or a daughter to the mother, except that the degree of intimacy with the mother is in general greater. A nephew or a niece has closer ties with his or her maternal uncle. During certain ritual occasions in the life cycle, e.g. circumcision, the presence of the maternal uncle is often obligatory. He is expected to show special favour and affection to



his nephew and niece by frequently giving them generous presents. The relation of *mami* (the wife of the *mama*) to her (husband's) nephew and niece is rather formal. However, she stands somewhat in the position of a mother to these relatives.

A *khala* or a mother's sister is considered as close as the mother. Her husband, i.e. *khalu*, is looked upon as a father or as a *chacha*, but there is always a greater distance between a *khalu* and his wife's nephew and niece than between these latter and his wife, the informal intimacy is lacking. The relationship and role of a *phupha* (a father's sister's husband) to his wife's nephew and niece corresponds to that of *khalu*, but the relation of a *phuphu* to her brother's son and daughter is closer and more informal. Cousin marriages, as I have inferred, force *mami*, *khalu* and *phupha* to be circumspect in their dealings with their nephews.

The relations between the cousins of both sexes ordinarily approximate that between siblings. Siblings and their cousins are often playmates in childhood. An elder sibling often looks after the younger. After reaching the age of thirteen or fourteen, siblings as well as their cousins of the opposite sex begin to keep a certain distance between themselves. An elder brother is called *bara bhai*. The same term is used for an elder half-brother or an elder cousin, except where future marital relations are a possibility, in which case references to such a person tend to be indirect. An elder sister is called *bu'bu*. The term 'sister' includes half-sisters and cousins. A younger sibling, cousin, half-brother or half-sister are addressed by their respective names.

As regards interpersonal relations within the family, the Moslem talk at great length about the different ideals that should be put into practice with a view to maintaining the relationship between a husband and a wife. In contrast to the Hindu and the tribal Santal, they are observed to be vocal in narrating the ideals to be observed in such relations. The Koran deals, in great detail, with the relation that a husband and a wife should have between them. Although there is no evidence that they go exclusively by the word of the Koran, the possibility remains that the Koranic norms

influence actual behaviour. The first and foremost demand on the wife by the husband is unconditional devotion toward him. The other thing they talk about is *purdah*. Husbands should take adequate measures to keep their wives in *purdah*, and their wives should try to observe it. These, however, constitute a kind of thinking aloud mostly on the part of the rich and a feedback of formal talks (*woaz*) given by mullahs on different religio-festive occasions like *milad*. In their daily life there is not much scope for practising such high ideals. Husbands expect respect, love and a submissive attitude from their wives, who should look after their well-being. In return they look after their wives' welfare. The husband-wife relation is of complementary role performance and dependence and may have an undertone of love and affection which remains elusive to an observer, especially one who is an outsider. The parent-child relation has an overtone of love and affection and a deep emotional bond is often noticeable between them, especially when their child is young.

There is a qualitative distinction between the rich and the poor in terms of interpersonal relations within the family. Among the poor, relations are of a primordially emotional nature. These are based on need, are dependent largely on co-operation and mutual understanding and are free of constraints such as affected modesty between husband and wife. As sons advance in age, they stand on an equal footing with their fathers in terms of support and maintenance of the family.

In a family the husband, in general, dominates the wife (see also the Koran, *sura* : 4, ayat : 34). The husband's role is chiefly that of bread-earner. The wife looks after the domestic side : cooking, cleaning, fetching water and rearing children. The son (*beta*) and daughter (*beti*), if any, help their parents with light work. Among the poor, a son, sometimes from an early age, helps his family by working as a *mahendar* in another family. Women are not allowed to go outside to help members of their family except during childhood, due to observance of *purdah*. A grown-up girl assists her mother and elder sisters. In an extended family she also helps

her *chachi*, and elder girl cousins, etc. She also helps grandmothers and wives of brothers, if any. Grown-up girls are often taught different domestic skills by these relatives, a mother usually taking great care in the training of her daughter.

A son is expected to look after his parents in their old age. A son's wife (*bau* or *bauma*) is expected to be courteous and obedient to her husband's parents. The relationship between a son's wife and his father is one of respectful distance. In a joint family a son's wife is usually governed by the son's mother.

In an extended family the brothers' wives treat each other as sisters. An elder brother's wife stands as an elder sister to a younger brother's wife.

Regarding the structure of families, I have observed that well-to-do people, both among the local Moslem and the Hindu, are often members of joint and extended families. At Bergram half of the so-called *Bhadralok* are members of joint or extended families. At Khiruli there are fourteen joint and extended Moslem families against fifty-seven nuclear families. In comparison to the Hindu, the Moslem have more nuclear families. There are only ten joint families among the low caste at Bergram.

According to the Koranic rules (see *sura* : 4, *ayat* : 3) a Moslem, if he can afford it, is allowed to have as many as four wives at a time. He cannot, however, have two sisters as co-wives together (*sura* : 4, *ayat* : 22). At Khiruli and other villages in the area monogamy is commonly practised and favoured. There are, however, a few cases of polygyny in most of the Moslem villages in my area of study. At Khiruli there are three such unions.

Strained relations are often evident between co-wives, half-brothers, half-sisters, between half-brother and half-sister and between stepmothers and children; but these seldom result in open quarrels.

According to the rules of the Koran and the Hadith each co-wife and stepchild inherits a specified portion of property from the man (details in the ensuing pages). This condition, to a great extent, helps assuage any strained relationship that might exist

between the co-wives even when one of them is especially favoured by the husband. Similarly, to a great degree, it also allays what otherwise might become a situation of constraint amongst half-brothers and half-sisters.

Although the Moslem practise polygyny, polyandry is prohibited among them. A woman can take a husband only after the death of her former husband or when there is a divorce between the woman and her husband.

Sometimes a local widow is married by her husband's brother. The Moslem women here, as of custom, avoid their husbands' elder brothers, though there is no such rule stipulating this in the Islamic tradition. It seems to be an influence of the dominant Hindu system of kinship where the wife strictly avoids her husband's elder brothers.

In such unions the children by the former husband do not as a rule change their term of address for their father's brother who becomes their mother's husband and thus their stepfather. The same practice is maintained by the children of the husband. They address their stepmother as *chachi* instead of addressing her as *ma* (mother or stepmother). Thus, there is little change so far as terms of address are concerned; but because of the Islamic rules of inheritance the relationship between stepparents and their stepchildren as well as between the half-siblings takes on added significance.

When a man marries his deceased wife's sister the situation is very similar. At Khiruli there were three unions of this kind. Two of these unions were with the wives' unmarried younger sisters, but in the third case the husband had married a widowed elder sister of his dead wife.

The Moslem generally are on joking terms with their elder brothers' wives, with their wives' younger sisters and brothers, and with grandchildren and grandchildren's spouses. It has already been stated that a Moslem is prohibited from marrying into a descending or an ascending generation. Still, grandparents frequently indulge in ribald jokes with grandchildren and their

spouses. In the light of their codified rules regarding certain prohibited marriages, this ambivalence of behaviour seems to be another Hindu influence. Except for the allowance of cousin marriages, the general pattern of relationship and the roles of individuals in it, the Moslem kinship system resembles that of the Hindu. Since the Moslem use Urdu for almost all terms of address and reference, their kinship terms are very different and distinct in the local context. Their terms of address and reference for kin in most cases are the same.

Whatever distinct pattern the Moslem have in their kinship and related social structure they consciously maintain. They can without difficulty maintain the distinct characteristics of their society because of their codified ideal model. Moreover, specialized agents like *kazi*, *maulavi*, etc. help them determine the proper customs as laid down in the Koranic and the Hadith texts for practical use in their social life.



## Chapter 6

### Inheritance

The principles of the Moslem rules of inheritance are laid down in broad outline in the Koran (*sura* 4, *ayat* 11, 12 and 176). The body of Moslem law is, however, complicated enough to form a subject of lifelong study. Here we shall deal only with the broad principles of the text, as interpreted by jurists. The following are the general principles that govern the rules (see also A'ḥ and 181):

- 1) The power of testamentary disposition of a person's property extends over only one-third of it, the remaining two-thirds must be distributed among heirs as laid down in the Koranic and Hadith texts.
- 2) The distribution of the property of a person takes place after the legacies and debts (including funeral expenses) have first been settled. It is to be noted that debts must be genuine and not reckless debts. Funeral expenses should also be reasonable.
- 3) Legacies cannot be left to any of the heirs included in the scheme of distribution, otherwise it would amount to upsetting the shares and giving undue preference to one heir over another. In fact, equity and fair dealing should be observed in all matters so that no one's interests are prejudiced. It is also prescribed that shares be calculated with fairness.

- 4) Generally, but not always, the male takes a share double that of the female in his own category.

In the following lines I shall briefly describe the rules appertaining to this as laid down in the Koran. In doing so I shall take the liberty to freely quote Ali n d 181, 182 and 235.

According to the rules, children's shares are fixed, but their amount depends upon what goes to the deceased's parents. If both parents are living and there are also children of the deceased, both father and mother take a sixth each; if only one parent is living, he or she takes his or her sixth, and the rest goes to the children. If there is no child or heir and the parents are living, the mother gets a third and the father the remaining two-thirds, if there are no children but there are brothers and sisters, the mother has a sixth, and the father apparently gets the residue.

Among spouses, the husband takes half of his deceased wife's property if she leaves no child, the rest going to residuaries, if she leaves a child, the husband gets only a fourth. Following the rule that the female share is generally half the male share, the widow gets a fourth of her deceased husband's property if he leaves no children, and an eighth if he leaves children. If there are more widows than one, their collective share is a fourth or an eighth as the case may be and this they must divide equally.

The inheritance of the property of a person with or without child who has left no descendant or ascendant (however distant), but only collaterals, would be as follows: if there is a widow or widower surviving, she or he takes the share as already defined before the collaterals come in. The collaterals, namely brothers or sisters, are here interpreted by theologians and jurists as meaning uterine brothers or sisters. The uterine brother or sister, if only one survives, takes a sixth; if more than one survive, they take a third collectively and divide it among themselves.

The last verse (*i.e. ayat* : 176) of the *sura* : 4 in the Koran supplements the rule of inheritance to include the estate of a deceased person who has left as heir neither a descendant nor an



ascendant. The case of such a person, where he has uterine brothers or sisters, has been considered above. In this last verse, however, the inheritance of the property of such a person is considered where he has left brothers and/or sisters by the father's side, whether by the same mother or not. If the deceased leaves behind a relict, the latter's share would first be calculated as specified earlier. If the deceased leaves a single sister she would have a half share, the remaining half going to relatively remote heirs; if he leaves a single brother however, he would have the whole, if more than one brother, they divide the whole. If the person has left two or more sisters, they go between them two-thirds. If the person has left a brother and sister or brothers and sisters, they divide on the basis of each brother's share being twice that of the sister.

The shares of collaterals are generally calculated on the basis of a complicated system which cannot be described briefly. For this and details appertaining to these shares and also for other rules governing residuaries and their claims, reference should be made to special legal treatises.

This brief note on the Moslem rules of inheritance shows how complicated they are and how different and distinct in comparison with those of the neighbouring Hindu and tribal communities where traditionally inheritance of property is limited to males only. The Moslem, in general, are conscious of this distinct nature of their inheritance rules *vis-a-vis* those of other neighbouring communities, especially of the dominant Hindu. Actual detailed knowledge of these Islamic rules is, however, limited to a few specialists and professionals. In the actual practice of the rules there are certain observable variations. These variations can be brought to light if we look into the records of some cases of property inheritance studied by me at Khiruli.

In one of these cases it had been reported that certain sisters were given no share of the property. However this unlawful act was rationalized by my informant. He stated that although the sisters were literally given no share, the sum total of expenditure

incurred by the brothers for their sisters amounted to a considerable sum of money. This indirectly compensated for the loss that the sisters had apparently suffered. He maintained that the brothers bore the expense of the marriages of their sisters. Later, they further bore the expense of educating their sisters' sons. One of their sisters' sons, in fact, had stayed in the house of these brothers during his schooling. Moreover, he added, the brothers were required to bear the occasional expense of their sisters' visits when they came with their children to stay for short periods.

It is customary among the local women, irrespective of caste and community, to occasionally visit their paternal homes, especially on festive occasions. After the demise of the father, these women still continue to visit their paternal villages and generally stay in the houses of their brothers. On such visits brothers bear the expense of their stay. Sisters on their part feel it prudent to remain on close terms with their brothers. They know that otherwise they would be debarred from such visits. Women who move to distant villages after marriage but have their landed inheritance situated at their parental villages are often at a disadvantage. They have to depend on their brothers or their brothers' sons to look after their land and its produce. If they do not want to sell their share of land, they have perforce to be on good terms with their brothers and such kin. Moreover it is socially required that relations between brothers and their sisters' children be cordial and unstrained. This has a subtle bearing on the minds of the sisters. Because of this, women are often indirectly induced to forego their share, or part of it, in favour of their brothers in order to maintain unstrained relations with them. Advantage is often taken of this, and women are in that case not given their legitimate share. For instance, in almost all cases of inheritance, homestead land, houses, household furniture, animals and agricultural appliances are inherited by male descendants only. One woman informant at Khiruli told me with a little resentment that she received as her share a half acre of cultivable land, but she was given nothing from the rest of the property, like the pond for instance. Sometimes, women's shares

are not properly and lawfully calculated. In one of the cases of inheritance studied at Khiruli, I found five brothers taking five acres of cultivable land each, while their only sister was given two and one-third acres of land. Her legitimate share of land should have been at least two and a half acres or more, because she had not been given any share of the homestead land. However, I must mention that of all the cases of inheritance studied, this seemed closest to the Koranic stipulation.

I shall give only one more illustration. This case shows the extremely disadvantageous situation that a woman may face in maintaining her right over her 'own' property. A fifty-five year old widower of Khiruli married in 1968 a widow of another village. A year later he was intending to divorce her. The reason behind this intended divorce was that the lady did not agree to testamentarily dispose of her property of two-thirds of an acre of land to him. As the lady had no relative or person known to her in the village Khiruli, she practically found no villager to speak in her favour.

There are, however, instances where women are lawfully and even sometimes favourably treated as regards disposition of property. In one instance, I found from my data that a woman inherited her paternal household and homestead land. In another instance, a woman disposed of her six and a half acres of land to her son's first wife who was also her brother's daughter.

Equity and fair dealing are not always observed in matters of inheritance among the local Moslem. Shares are not always calculated with fairness. This sometimes involves them in expensive litigation. However, most people cannot afford the cost of availing themselves of formal judicial procedures and depend for fair arbitration in inheritance disputes on village panchayats which consist of selected influential villagers.

The complexity of the rules of inheritance stems from involvement of too many close kin of both sexes - parents, children, multiple spouses and numerous collaterals - in the share. These rules bind the above-mentioned kin into a corporate

body and for this reason its members are likely to be in favour of mutual adjustment between them. On the other hand, unfair dealing, genuine or even assumed, suspected by any single one of them with regard to the various shares of different kin gives rise to discontent within the whole corporate body, even among far-off relatives, not necessarily heirs. Sometimes the corporate body splits into two or more antagonistic groups. These groups, in an attempt to become strong, often join and collaborate at the village level with different factional groups of their respective choice. Such a group may set up a new factional group within the village. This, however, is rare. In 1969 there were four factional divisions at Khiruli. Close kin were often found to be members of disparate factions indicating strained relations between them. One of the main reasons behind this was ingrained conflict and indignation among kin concerning inheritance of property. This factionalism among the local Moslem due to their complex rules of inheritance is known to the local non-Moslem people, especially the Hindu. My Moslem respondents at Khiruli admitted to the prevailing practice of unfair dealing in regard to the sharing of inheritance among them and to the resulting factionalism in their social life.

It should be particularly mentioned here that this is essentially an internal factionalism limited to the Moslem social system, and thus it never disturbs their solidarity with respect to non-Moslem societies. It is only in the operation of the rules of inheritance that we find deflexions, though these deflexions have caused no change among the Moslem in their attitude towards the codified rules. Such deflexions are understandably peculiar to the practice of the rules in a given local situation.

Theologians and jurists who are the human communicants of the sacred Islamic tradition play very important and responsible roles as formal agents. As explained elsewhere they keep their laymen constantly aware of the "correct" tradition of Islam. In doing so, they curb directly and indirectly the tendency to deflect from the tradition of Islam among the Moslem and correct any deviation in its practice. Moreover, the formal judicial system of

the State gives the Moslem additional provisos which limit variations in the practice of the rules of inheritance. The identity and the social solidarity of the Moslem as a community is thus achieved through their scrupulous attachment to their ideal model - the Islamic tradition.

We can gauge the prevalent attitude of the local Moslem towards their ideal model if we take into account four cases of inheritance of property among the Moslem villagers of Khiruli. In all these cases my respondents gave me direct information regarding tentative propositions on the division of property.

In the first case the richest Moslem of Khiruli, whose total cultivable land was sixteen and two-thirds acres, had given six and two-thirds acres of land to his only son. He had decided to give four acres of land to each of his two daughters, the rest going to his only wife. It is to be noted here that if the shares of the daughters had been decided as four acres each, then the son should have had eight acres. As the son would inherit most of the homestead land and other items of property after the death of his father, his share was being legitimately calculated as six and two-thirds acres. The wife's share of cultivable land should have been slightly more than two acres; but according to the tentative calculation she was getting two acres. This was because she was inheriting a portion of the homestead land and other items of property. (Unfortunately, I could not get any information regarding the cash money and its distribution among heirs in this case or in other cases referred to here). *This tentative sharing of property among daughters and wife was made after the person had decided to go on the hajj.* It is customary among the Moslem in my area of study to tentatively dispose of their property before going on the hajj. They pay their debts, if any, before the tentative dispensation of property.

In the second case the distribution was expected to be simpler. Two brothers lived jointly. Their father gave them six and two-thirds acres of land. The eldest told me that they would divide this equally between themselves.

In the third case an old man of Khiruli had two-thirds of an acre of cultivable land. He had already disposed of a third of an acre to his eldest son by his deceased first wife. The son lived separately. The old man told me that the remaining one third would be divided amongst the three sons and two daughters of his present wife, following the Islamic rule that the female share should be half the male share. He, however, made no reference to any share for his present wife.

In the fourth and last case relating to dispensation of property among heirs, the eldest brother in a family informed me that his father possessed a total of five and one-third acres of cultivable land. He said that the three brothers would get one and one-third acres each and the remaining one and one-third acres would be divided equally between two sisters, each of them getting two-thirds of an acre. I noticed however that this man did not give a thought to the possible claim of his own mother and his stepmother, both of whom were still alive.

He told me that his mother held one and one-third acres of agricultural land which would eventually be equally divided among the three brothers and two sisters. There happens to be no discrimination between male and female shares when the property belongs to the deceased mother.

In this short account of the Islamic institution of inheritance my main endeavour is to show how and to what extent the Moslem maintain the ideal rules of the Koranic text. We find that there are variations and deflexions from the ideal rules in their day to day practice at Khiruli. One of the main variations is related to women's shares. Women of the local dominant community of the Hindu do not usually share in property. Even after the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill, according to which a sister's share of property is equal to that of a brother, there is absolutely no change in traditional Hindu practice. The unfavourable treatment which is often the lot of Moslem women as regards shares cannot be attributed to the influence of dominant Hindu practices. It is rather due to the natural male dominance in their patriarchal

society and this is the fundamental reason behind the disadvantageous position held by both Hindu and Moslem women in their societies. We further find that although there are certain variations in practice of the codified Islamic rules of inheritance, this deflexion is inherent in the contingency of the local situation and is not a reflection of the Hindu rules and their practice.

This reveals to what extent the Moslem maintain the Koranic rules of inheritance. In an attempt to understand how they maintain and conform to the Koranic and Hadith rules, we find that they depend for guidance largely on the tradition of Islam. This tradition with its special agents and system of communication present in its very structure helps the Moslem maintain a conscious attitude towards the correct form as depicted in Islam. The agents, namely theologians, professionals and jurists point out both directly and indirectly the variations, if any, in day to day practices of the correct rules of Islamic tradition. The village council and the formal judiciary are the two bodies, internal and external, that try to restrict any deviation in the practice of the Islamic rules of inheritance.





## Chapter 7

### Rites of Passage

The various rites associated with Moslem birth, marriage and death are highly distinct from those of the other neighbouring communities, making the Moslem community distinctive socially and culturally. Like the other Moslem religious and social practices these rites are thoroughly codified in the Hadith texts. Over and above this codification there are certain local innovations peripheral to the main body, in no way interfering with the Islamic absolutes inherent in these rites.

The ritual of the life cycle in a society is traditional in the sense that it is practised generation after generation. Its adherents usually become conscious of the various traditional precepts and practices of their society through informal and formal tutelage by elders.

In so far as the formal knowledge of traditional rituals is concerned, the Moslem are more systematic in this than any of their neighbouring communities. They have codified rules even for the details of their various life cycle rituals. Moreover, there are trained agents to make laymen aware of the tradition.

The Hindu have the core of their tradition in a codified form. However, in practice, the Hindu tend to confine themselves far less to the codified form than do the Moslem. In actuality, the former introduce an enormous amount of local usages (*deshachar*) and popular practices (*lokachar*) or, in other words, local innovations that mostly overshadow the codified tradition. The differences that exist between castes are reflected in the practice of religious and non-religious traditions among the different Hindu castes. Unlike the different Moslem groups under observation, the different

Hindu castes do not maintain uniformity in their traditional practices and rites.

The Hindu have special agents like Brahmans who make them aware of their tradition; but their network of communication for the sacred text is not as structured and systematic as that of the Moslem.

The tribals, on the other hand, have no codified traditions and in the strict sense lack trained agents (see Redfield 1971) for maintaining a consistent continuity of tradition within their society.

In contrast to the neighbouring Hindu and tribal, the Moslem are so aware of their codified text that they can distinguish between rites which are stipulated in the written text and those which accrue to them in the course of generations of practice or are local usages shaped by environs and contemporary conditions.

In the following lines I shall describe the rituals in the life cycle as I observed them among the Moslem at Khiruli and in the surrounding area.

Rites of passage of any community have large variations, almost from one household to another. In fact, there is no end to ethnographic description if one desires to go into every detail as practised by the people. However, I have presented here, from a special point of view, the general pattern of the rituals that I have observed and in which I have participated.

### Birth of a Child

The birth of the first child is normally greeted with the warmest demonstration of unaffected joy in the homes of the parents of both wife and husband. The birth of the first child usually takes place in the house of the wife's parents. A Moslem sends his expectant wife to her parents' home when her time approaches. This is a local custom. This custom is also prevalent among the Hindu. The wife is not sent to her parents' home for subsequent births; but some parents who can afford to, and live either within the village or nearby, bring their expectant daughters

home on all such occasions.

At childbirth, women of a particular Hindu Hari caste are called to attend as midwives. In general, no women of any other caste or community work as midwives in the area. The wife of the head of the Hari family at Khiruli, together with her son's wife, serves as midwife to the Moslem villagers of Khiruli and adjoining villages.

When a male child is born, and especially when the child is the first issue, there is often much clamorous rejoicing. According to the Islamic custom, *azan* (summon to prayer) is called aloud by a male, not for prayer but to proclaim the birth of the child. This is done at Khiruli only on the occasion of the birth of a male child. The child's father or grandfather usually does the proclaiming. Some devout Moslems well versed in Islamic rules read *takbir* (i.e. the creed) in the left ear of the new-born.

After parturition the mother observes "pollution" for seven days. For these seven days she does not offer regular prayers (*namaz*). On the seventh day after the birth the barber shaves the child's head and pares the nails of both child and mother. The midwife's presence is customary at the time of this ceremony. There are two Moslem barbers in the village of Khiruli, either of whom may be called on this occasion.

After being shaved the child is bathed. The mother also takes a bath and her "period of pollution" is then considered over.

On this day the Moslem celebrate *aqika*. On this occasion parents, grandparents and other close kin like uncles and aunts etc. name the new-born. *Aqika* consists of a sacrifice to God in the name of the child, two goats for a boy and one for a girl. A quarter of the sacrificial meat is distributed among the poor. The Moslem at Khiruli usually give away this portion to the poor within the village. Another quarter of the meat is given to kin, generally close kin. The rest is kept for their own consumption.

Those who cannot afford the ceremony of *aqika* on the seventh day after the birth of a child may postpone it till the fourteenth or the twenty-first day, or any convenient time later on. Some of

them sacrifice only one goat at the time of the *aqika* of a male child. Others arrange the rite in conjunction with *Korbari*, when, sacrificing a large animal, they offer one seventh of it to God in the name of the child whose *aqika* is being fulfilled. It may be pointed out that there is no such rule in the sacred text justifying this practice. The Moslem in the area of study, however, do it because they say that for a long time this has been their practice.

The poor who cannot afford anything skip the ceremony of sacrifice and it is not considered unlawful to do so according to Islam.

### Circumcision

No Moslem should omit the ceremony of circumcision (*i.e. khatna or sunnat*) and every Moslem male child is circumcised within the seventh year of his life. During the ceremony the maternal uncle of the boy is usually present. Circumcision is always done by a special Moslem barber locally known as *hajam*. However, the barbers themselves dislike the term and call themselves *khalifa*. In Khiruli there is mass circumcision, as barbers who can do this visit the village only every two or more years. In 1968 on the nineteenth of the Bengali month Chaitra (corresponding to April) there were as many as thirty-two small boys circumcised on one single day. Circumcision is done in the early morning before sunrise. Two barbers come. One holds back the muscular portion with a forked bamboo piece and lets the skin hang loose while the other cuts the skin with a sharp razor. They get one to ten rupees for the operation, according to the means of the child's family. For a few days before circumcision women of the family, especially the young and fun-loving, beat drums (*dhol*) and sing songs till late in the evening. This they also do before a marriage ceremony. They say that this sort of merry-making is something beyond or rather against their *shariat* or tradition. However, a few men and women maintain that it is a local tradition and they like indulging in it. Most women try to conceal the fact and say that they never indulge in such merry-

making. However, before any *sunnat* or marriage the village is filled with the sound of singing and beating of drums till late at night. Some Moslems rationalize this singing and drum-beating by saying that the women are illiterate and therefore they know no better than to go against *shariat*

### Marriage

The Moslem marriages occurring in the area of study are a quixotic mixture of both local (regional) and textual (Islamic) rites. I shall describe first the local rites that have become an integral part of Moslem marriages, as these give us an insight into the mechanism of adjustment that the Moslem make in a plural society. I shall then move on to the textual rites to strengthen my hypotheses regarding the maintenance of Moslem identity

### Non-Islamic Practices

*Na Samandha* Marriages are usually arranged by the parents and guardians. When people visit a family to select a bride or a groom it is locally known as *la* or *na samandha*, which literally means "new negotiation"

*Dowry* The Moslem feel that the incidence of close-kin marriages is in decline due to the allure of dowry. They say

'Nowadays people are eager to get a dowry so marriages are arranged where the offer of dowry is largest

The Moslem say that the dowry system has only recently come into vogue among them. In fact, I inquired about the incidence of dowry and found that in the fifties dowry had not been involved in any marriage in Khuruli. They consider it a Hindu custom. The Moslem ideally repudiate the system of dowry as it is not according to their *shariat*. The rich Moslem, however, cannot resist the obvious attractions of getting more wealth through dowry. Besides the recent Hindu trait of dowry, the Moslem have adopted a host of other Hindu customs in their marriage ceremonies.

They apply turmeric on the bodies of groom and bride; they send *lagan*, presents to the bride by the groom's party; they observe *astamangala*, in which the newly-married husband comes to live with his wife in her natal home for eight days after marriage.

*Lagan* : *Lagan* is usually sent in a new leather suitcase or in a small steel trunk. It is sent a few days or a week before the marriage. It includes a complete set of clothes - a *sari*, blouse, petticoat, handkerchief, shoes or sandals, cosmetics, and so forth. Sometimes I noticed a book dealing with conjugal life sent along with the clothes and cosmetics.

*Astamangala* : During *astamangala*, when the newly-married husband visits his wife's natal home, he is often invited by the newly-related kin within the village to visit them. Each of these families gives him two to five rupees according to their means, after entertaining him. He also receives gifts from his wife's family. In the course of my inquiries I came to know of two Moslem brothers in Khiruli who married in 1967; one got one hundred and forty rupees in lieu of clothes and the other a wrist watch costing one hundred and fifty-five rupees from their wives' families.

*Smearing of turmeric and sondha, and ceremony of khir khawano* : The smearing of the bodies with paste of turmeric is done every morning four to eight days before marriage. In the evening the Moslem anoint the body of the groom with perfumed paste prepared from the leaves of a particular tree locally known as *sondha*, plus certain special flowers called *gophul* with the addition of a few other items. At the time of applying *sondha* the women sing songs. The turmeric paste and *sondha* used on the body of the groom is scraped off and sent to the bride to be smeared on her body in turn. The Moslem say that the perfume of *sondha* attracts *jin* (spirits). To prevent this happening, the bride and the groom have to keep close to their persons an iron article, usually a *janti* or a pair of nutcrackers. Spirits are supposedly rendered harmless by the proximity of iron. The day before the actual marriage ceremony no turmeric or *sondha* is applied. On this day the bride

and the groom bathe in the morning, using soap if desired. In the evening there is a ceremony known as *khir khawano*. This is held in both the bride's and the groom's homes. During the ceremony a dish of sweetmeats and home-made rice cakes is placed before the bride or the bridegroom. Villagers and relatives who are in attendance present gifts to the betrothed after taking a little of the food from the plate and putting it in the mouth of the bride or the groom as the case may be.

In the ceremony of *khir khawano* (or *khawano*) the father first puts some dust (*dhulphul*), which is collected from the shrine of Satyapir (see page 15), into the mouth of the bride or the groom. This dust is considered sacred. Lastly the mother takes part in the ceremony, putting a small portion of the sweets into the mouth of the betrothed.

### Marriage Party

On the marriage day the groom is accompanied to the house of the bride by villagers and relatives. Members of this party are locally known as *barat*.

The party of *barat* who came to the marriage of the girl which I attended consisted of only ten men, besides the mother of the groom. Women companions who come with the groom and his *barat* party are locally called *dola bibi*. The groom, if he can afford it, manages to hire or borrow a horse and prefers to come riding to the marriage *shamiana*, or marquee, but not being used to riding horses he mounts the beast only when actually approaching the village.

The marriage where I was present was between kin. Both the parties were poor. Kasem, a middle-aged Moslem villager was the matchmaker in the marriage. The groom was his wife's brother.

The groom and his party came in the morning. They were given an outhouse (*baithakkhana*) to stay in. The groom wore *chapkan* (a long shirt), white pyjamas, shoes of black leather and socks. At about eleven o'clock the members of the *barat* party

bathed and then took food prepared for them by the bride's family. The groom's and bride's parties communicated only through the matchmaker, Kasem.

At about 1 p.m. the marriage ceremony took place. On the evening of the same day the groom was given a special dinner. A few of the bride's relatives who were on joking terms with the bride, and now considered themselves to be on the same terms with the groom, shared food from the same plate with him. They joked with him while eating the food, often embarrassing him to the point of curbing his appetite. On the following morning the bride and the groom were sent away in a bullock cart with her belongings.

### Marriage and Factions within the Village of Khiruli

In Khiruli there were four rival factions whose members often showed marked reluctance to take part in social ceremonies\* of rival sections such as marriage. I attended the marriage of a girl in Khiruli in 1967, and noticed that not all the Moslem villagers and even the kin within the village participated in the marriage. Only those who belonged to the same factional group as the bride's father attended, assisted in and enjoyed the ceremony. The elder half-brother of the girl, who lived separately in an adjoining hut, did not participate in the marriage, as he belonged to another rival faction in the village.

### Principal Ceremony of Marriage

The principal ceremony of marriage among the Moslem is contractual. For accomplishing this part a mullah acts as *kazi* (often pronounced *kaji*) or judge. The bride's party appoints an *ukil* (or agent). Two *sakshi* (or *sakkhi*, witnesses), called in the local Moslem dialect *gawa*, are also appointed.

*Den Mohar* (or *den mehr*) : In a Moslem marriage the groom must pay *den mohar* (a sort of bride price as per the Koranic injunctions, see *sura* : 2, *ayat* : 236 and *sura* : 4, *ayat* : 4 and 25). In the marriage that I attended I saw that respectable villagers were



called, whose first duty was to examine the ornaments brought by the groom's party for the bride, a gold ring, a necklace, a pair of gold ear-rings and so on. They decided that the cost of these articles would be around five hundred rupees. The *den mohar* offered was eight hundred and ninety-nine rupees (Rich Moslems sometimes offer *den mohar* upto four thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine rupees). They prefer the amount to be an odd number. After the amount of *den mohar* had been decided the *ukal* recommended the marriage to the *kazi* as was the custom. The *kazi* then sent the witnesses with the *ukal* to the bride. The *ukal* asked the bride, following the conventional pattern, whether she was willing to marry so-and-so son of so-and-so of such-and-such village for a proposed sum of eight hundred and ninety-nine rupees as *den mohar*, out of which he would give five hundred and one rupees in ornaments and the remaining three hundred and eighty-eight rupees in cash later on.

The bride received the proposal from behind a veil and answered with an affirmative 'yes'. The same question was put thrice to her and each time the answer was in the affirmative. Witnesses require to have earlier acquaintance with the bride so that they can recognize her voice. The witnesses and the *ukal* returned to the assembly of *kazi*, groom, *barat* and others, greeting them with "*a salamo alaikum*" ("peace be with you"). The *kazi* and a few others returned the greeting and then the *kazi* asked them what news they had. The *ukal* conveyed the answer given by the bride. The *kazi* formally scrutinized the witnesses. Then the *kazi* asked the groom whether he would marry so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so of such-and-such village, who intended marrying him for a *den mohar* of eight hundred and ninety-nine rupees. The groom's answer was in the affirmative. After this the *kazi* solemnized the marriage according to Islamic *shariat*. Lastly a glass of sweetened water (*sarbat*, i.e. sherbet) was given to the bridegroom who drank a few sips, the rest being taken to the bride and given her to drink.

The groom's party gave a fee to the *kazi* for his services. They distributed sweetmeats which they had brought with them among

the assembled people, giving larger shares to the *kazi*, *ukil*, witnesses and a few respectable villagers who were present.

The main ceremony connected with Moslem marriage in this area is different in form from that of the Hindu. Parallel and cross cousin marriages tabooed in all other neighbouring communities are prevalent among the Moslem, and are recognized by the other communities as a typical Moslem practice.

The Moslem, both male and female, are known for their custom of remarriage. In Khiruli I found twenty-nine men and eleven women who had married more than once (see Table 6). There were seven love-matches, but none of these was the first marriage of the spouses.

TABLE 6

NUMBER OF MARRIAGES WITHIN THE LIFE  
SPAN OF INDIVIDUAL MOSLEMS IN KHIRULI

	Men	Women
Twice married	24	10
Thrice married	5	-
Four times married	-	1
Total number of persons married more than once	29	11

Divorce and Period of Iddat

Divorce, as well as the necessity of precautions to guard against its abuse, has been dealt with in detail in the following *sura* and *ayat* of the Koran : *sura* : 2, *ayat* : 228 to 232, 236, 237 and 241 ; *sura* : 33, *ayat* : 49 and *sura* : 65, *ayat* : 1 to 7. After the termination of a Moslem marriage the wife has to observe a period of *iddat* before forming any new union. This period of *iddat* (waiting) means three menstrual periods and it formally covers a period of three months. This is observed with a view to determining

whether a woman bears a child in her womb by her recently divorced husband. This helps to ascertain the parentage of a child thus born (cf. *sura* : 2, *ayat* : 228 and see also *sura* : 33, *ayat* : 49 in the Koran).

Although Hindu low castes and tribals in the area permit divorce and remarriage of divorced persons, they have no custom similar to the *iddat* practised by the Moslem.

### Funeral

Of all the rituals in the life cycle, Moslems especially extol their funeral rites as very distinctive and sophisticated. They maintain that they are very dissimilar to the Hindu and tribal in treating their dead. They wash the body of the dead person with perfumed soap, taking special care to wash the mouth, clean the teeth, nostrils and lower parts of the body, dress it in new clothes, smear scented oil (*atar*) on it and then, instead of burning the body as most Hindu do, put it in a grave. Close relatives of the dead person perform the task of washing and dressing the body. Villagers co-operate with the relatives in washing or *gosol*. There are always a few persons in the village especially skilled in such jobs. Males are washed and dressed by male kin, and females are prepared by women. The dead body is never stripped completely for washing.

They take especial care in digging the grave, so as to keep the walls inside smooth. In fact, there are always certain experts among the villagers whose help is sought for this kind of work. The grave has to be deep enough that one can comfortably sit upright inside. They believe that after the grave is filled in and the mourners have left the cemetery, an angel of God awakens the dead person and makes him sit up in his grave. One of the reasons for washing and perfuming the dead body is to ensure that the angel may not abominate the dead person seeing dirt on his body. The corpse is carried on a bier to the graveyard by pallbearers who have to bathe before touching it. Before interring the dead all the assembled Moslems say *janaja namaz* for the dead person,

facing westward. The body is placed inside the grave with its head to the north and feet to the south, its face turned towards the west. All Moslems, irrespective of any social and class status, come and join *janaja* and throw fistfuls of earth on the grave. Even Moslem passing by on such occasions are supposed to join in the *janaja* and throw earth on the grave. This is considered a meritorious act. Before putting earth on the grave, they make a flattened roof of bamboo and bundles of paddy stalks, the object being to leave sufficient space within for the dead to sit up. The roof is constructed level with the ground. On this roof or platform they put earth and raise a mud plastered tomb in the shape of a triangular prism. Women never accompany a dead body to the graveyard.

Moslems keep a dead body for twelve or thirteen hours before burying it. It takes a long time to arrange all the paraphernalia connected with burial - digging a grave, washing and dressing the corpse and so on. Moreover, they often wait for the relatives, who are immediately informed of the death, to come and pay their last respects. Villagers and relatives of the dead within the village go to other villages where close kin of the deceased live to inform them of the death. Hindu low caste villagers of Khiruli often act as messengers for their Moslem co-villagers, conveying such news.

The death of a rich person brings together many more relatives and neighbours than the death of a poor individual. Neighbours are not always given news of the death if they are not kin, but they come on hearing the news from others. Female relatives who come to see the dead person for the last time and people who come to throw earth on the grave are often fed after the interment by the family of the deceased. Villagers and close relatives are very helpful at such times in arranging the refreshments. They chop wood, fetch water, cook and serve food and water to the guests. However, I observed that although all the villagers participated in *janaja* and in putting earth on the grave, only the members of the factional group to which the deceased belonged took part in arranging and partaking of the food.

On the fortieth day after the death of a person his family, if it can afford to, arrange *milad* and give alms (*khairat*) to fakirs

The funeral for a dead child is usually very modest. No relatives, other than parents (if they are not present at the time of death), or grandparents and uncles if they were especially fond of the child, are informed. No bier is used. The dead child is carried to the grave in the arms of the father or another close relative. However, *janaja* and other paraphernalia are performed as usual in the graveyard.

If death occurs during the new moon, Moslems at Khiruli arrange a vigil for the deceased in the graveyard for three consecutive nights. They say that they arrange this watch lest jackals dig the body of the deceased out of the grave.

Moslems frequently argued with me that the Hindu funeral system was indecent. It did not adequately maintain the privacy of the deceased, as the cloth wrapped around the dead body was usually burnt first leaving the body bare (cf. Aziz 1988: 3). Through a number of informal talks with my Moslem respondents I felt that they were greatly convinced of the solemnity and superiority of their funeral system. They quite often asked me whether I liked their funeral and did so with a very self-assured air, expecting an affirmative answer. The Moslem believe that their tradition is inherently excellent. When I told my Moslem informants that I had some knowledge of their tradition from the sacred books of Koran and Hadith, they replied:

"You have come to know much about Islam. Moreover, by staying with us you have observed many of our rites and rituals. Do you not feel like becoming a Moslem?"

Some old Moslem respondents at Khiruli predicted that some day I would convert to Islam, as one who had got the taste of their sacred learning from the holy Koran and the Hadith was sure to become a Moslem.



## Chapter 8

### Socialization

When I was staying for about four months with a Moslem family at Khiruli in my last phase of field work, I used to observe how children within the family were being brought up. As a child learns to speak, the mother tries to acquaint the child with certain norms and behaviour. In the Moslem family in which I stayed in Khiruli the child, a four-year-old boy, was asked to say '*Bismillah*' meaning 'in the name of God or Allah', especially before he ate anything. If he said something bad, he was made to say "*toba*" (repentance). I found that the child was sometimes asked to repeat the *kalma* (faith) after his mother. While fondling him or telling him stories the mother would tell the boy what he would become when he grew up. He would be a mullah; people would then be impressed seeing him on the street wearing a gorgeous cap and a *sherwani* on his way home from the madrasah. Thus a Moslem child learns from his illiterate mother the highly esteemed status of mullahs. The boy was trained not to cry or disturb his mother while she offered her *namaz*. He was taught to value the reading of *namaz* as a sacred thing.

Sometimes the boy was allowed to go to the mosque with his grandfather especially during a *Jumma namaz*. After the *Jumma* some participants used to distribute *sinni* (catables). On many a *Jumma* day (Friday) I found the boy eagerly waiting for his little share of *sinni* with other children of the village who were gathered outside the mosque. Children here observe their elders solemnly reading *namaz* or listening to *khodba* (scriptures in Arabic) and in this way they become aware of the solemnity of these happenings. During different Moslem religious festivals which are mostly of a congregational nature, one can observe a flock of children celebrating the festivals along with their elders by mimicking the

different rites performed by them. Through this kind of participation children slowly learn the details of these practices and consequently comprehend their value too.

To receive *sinni*, the boy of the house in which I was staying often accompanied his elder sister on a Friday to the mosque. The sister was only five years older than he. Girls are allowed to go to the mosque and roam freely within and outside the village till the age of ten. After this, their freedom of movement becomes restricted. They are supposed to show some restraint in their behaviour as grown-up girls approaching womanhood. Thus they are counselled to maintain circumspection in their behaviour and if they disobey they are rebuked by parents and guardians or close kin.

Children are often sent to the village *maktab* to learn a little Urdu and to read the Koran in Arabic. Moslem villagers told me that there were more women than men able to read the Koran in Arabic. In the village I traced a few men who knew only the few *sura* they required for reading *namaz*; their wives however could go through all the *sura* of the Koran in Arabic, and one of the wives even ran a *maktab* within the village.

The students in the *maktab* are taught to read the Koran in a rather "unacademic" way. They read the Koran, but can hardly decipher the meaning of a single Arabic word. The holy books are solemnly handled and kept wrapped in cloth. This minor detail is taught to children at the *maktab* and at home. They learn these things almost as inevitably as they learn to walk. In the *maktab* children are taught how to read *namaz*. However, many adult Moslem males of Khiruli said that they had learnt to read *namaz* from their elders: grandparents, parents, uncles or such close kin. Girls are often taught to read *namaz* within their families by the older women members. I saw two girls, cousins of fifteen and sixteen years of age, being constantly criticized by their old grandmother, mother and aunt and brother's wife because they were incorrectly bowing (*sirdah*) during *namaz*.

I noticed that the *maktab* attached to the mosque was often



without its mullah. Villagers could not seem to keep a mullah the whole year round. Either he left of his own accord after finding a more remunerative job, or the villagers, never able to agree among themselves, threw him out as a convenient scapegoat. Thus, students at the *maktab* suffered. The replacement from within the village was not always regular in teaching them. This was one reason why many villagers preferred the *maktab* run by the lady mentioned above.

I asked many children when they would like to start to read *namaz* and keep *roza*. The answer frequently was simply only when they grew up. It seems that the concept of growing up to a child is often synonymous with the activities and work of adults. As they grow up, and especially during adolescence, they enthusiastically perform the different religious functions like reading daily *namaz* or at least *Jumma namaz*, fasting, sacrificing an animal according to prescribed Islamic custom, etc. The elders take great care in teaching the young in their charge the correct way of performing these different rites and duties. Sometimes they hand over the whole responsibility of certain religious duties like sacrificing animals to the young. Girls take an earlier interest than boys in learning and performing various Islamic rites. It seems that the girls are pressed by their elders into learning these things at an early age, in order to be fully trained by the time of their comparatively early marriage, when they will be leaving the parental home.

Moslems in the area value highly their different rites and rituals. Their meticulous observance, they think, brings them merit and paves their way to salvation. Although the practice of rites and rituals is theoretically based on purely religious grounds, in reality such practices tend to enhance the social status of the devotees. In consequence they are often ostentatious in their zeal, performing it not so much for merit as for social distinction. This becomes apparent when it is seen that Moslems shirk certain fundamental obligatory rites and duties of their religion; for instance no one in the village gives *zakat* as prescribed. Further,

they do not conform to the specified Islamic rules of behaviour. For instance, although there are rules specifically forbidding usury (see page 36), they loan money and paddy on interest, and as for the Islamic rules on inheritance these are more often than not flagrantly disregarded (cf. Chapter 6).

It must be said, however, that they try hard to save enough money to perform the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca during the twelfth Moslem month of Zul-Hajj

An individual must have the means if he wishes to fulfil all the different Islamic rites and duties. I frequently came across rich Moslems who, overlooking the poverty of their poor brethren, complained about negligence in observing various rites and duties. A few of them even regarded themselves as superior to others and tried to maintain a certain social distance by avoiding marital ties and restricting close social interaction with those who did not observe all rites and rituals. The rich hold much administrative power within the village and are treated with deference by the poor. This class cleavage, no doubt, puts much strain on the egalitarian principles of Moslem society. *However, it helped the society as such to keep up its tradition*, for those having adequate economic resources spare a good amount for elaborately practising the tradition in order to keep up their social distinction. The poor Moslem who can afford it try to emulate the rich by practising the tradition to acquire social status. Thus much zeal and enthusiasm in maintaining the tradition is engendered among both rich and poor within the society.

This prevailing zeal and enthusiasm incites the disinterested Moslem into performing most of the rites and duties observed by others. For instance, during Ramazan, when *siori* (see page 121) is cooked early in the morning to be eaten before sunrise, the disinterested Moslem have perforce to eat when others do. Villagers say that there is a certain amount of pleasure attached to eating together at an unaccustomed hour early in the morning before *roza*. Especially when a Moslem has enjoyed this exciting custom in his childhood it is too uncomfortably unconventional

to avoid it in his later life. I observed that Moslems who did not keep *roza* would evince distress in admitting the fact, when they found all other Moslems around them fasting. Simple people do not relish the feeling of standing apart from the crowd in any way. It makes them lonely and awkward. It seems that they feel like outsiders within their society and this feeling robs them of dignity.

Thus the Moslem, however irregular in his daily *namaz*, reads his *Id namaz* with all other villagers, confined as they are by the socio-cultural boundaries that have existed for a historically long time. The pressure of this Moslem traditional milieu with all its enthusiasm, habit and dignity leaves him no other option but to conform and help maintain the tradition.

Let me illustrate here how the Moslem I studied become aware of their tradition and the ideal model of Islamic life through socialization. Topics relating to the observance of their faith are discussed within the village throughout the year and are described and elaborated upon during every *milad* and in each *woaz* (sermon) given by the mullahs. In *maktab* and madrasahs students are instructed in these matters. Villagers often refer to their tradition in judging the righteousness of an act or in ascertaining the correct form of day-to-day behaviour. A Moslem child becomes imbued with the traditional ideal model. Once I asked a group of nine children of eight to thirteen years to each choose one of three places for a pleasure trip : Calcutta, Dacca, Mecca and London. Except for one twelve-year-old boy who wished to go to London, the other eight unanimously selected Mecca as the ideal place to visit (see page 10) . This boy and five girls were all primary level students. They all (except for one girl) attended the Upper Primary school (locally known as U.P. school) located in Khiruli. One of the girls, however, attended the Junior Basic School at Bergram.

Except for the boy mentioned above, who could not give any reason for his choice of London as a place worth visiting, others told me that they selected Mecca because they regarded it as a sacred place and visiting it would be praiseworthy. Some of them

chose Dacca as the second best place to visit, the reason being it was a country for Moslems.

Here I intend to illustrate with two cases how Moslems at Khiruli judged the worth of a person in their society

A former Moslem resident of Khiruli who resided, at the time of my research, at Bisthu Khanda, a village about two miles to the west of Khiruli, was a mullah. He taught Arabic and Urdu as second languages to Moslem students in the High school at Bergram. All the other teachers in the school were Hindu. I observed they were strongly anti-Moslem. They used to consider the Moslem as a whole essentially backward, illiterate and dirty. Their opinion of their Moslem colleague, however, differed considerably. They maintained that he had a 'non-Moslem mentality'. They said that he was aware of the backwardness of his own Moslem brethren and hated certain behaviour common to them. They added that he usually showed respect for all Hindu ideology.

I met the Moslem teacher in question and personally found him a very cultured and polite person who avoided questions that involved any direct slur on Hindu culture and tradition. It seemed to me however that he merely pretended that the Hindu imputations regarding the Moslem were true. His attitude became more intelligible to me as I started noticing the behaviour of this bearded mullah among the people of his own community in Khiruli. In their midst, I observed, he was a very staunch Moslem. He disliked the practice of such local Moslem rites as seemed not truly Islamic according to the sacred texts of the Koran and the Hadith. He did everything to persuade local Moslems to give up non-Islamic practices. Sometimes he tried to change those rites which were especially believed or known to be Hindu in origin, or he tried to further distinguish them in some way from their Hindu counterpart. For example, each year the local people, both Hindu and Moslem, celebrated the last day of the Bengali solar month Pausa (corresponding to the English month December-January) by preparing rice cakes and sweetmeats. This celebration

of the day is a widespread Hindu custom. I found the Moslem were aware of this fact; but to rationalize this practice of a well-known Hindu rite they used to say :

"In the past our forefathers could not read and so did not understand the meaning of Koran and Hadith and mullahs were too few. They started practising the rite without knowing whether it was Hindu or Moslem. We have now practised it for such a long time that we [simply] cannot skip the ceremony. Besides, country-made cakes prepared with powdered rice are the delicacies of the winter season and children would be disappointed and unhappy if their families drop the custom".

The mullah might have known how the common Moslem in the area felt about this; for he used to ask people not to stop it altogether, as this would cause disappointment; but he advised them that they should at least change the day for preparing cakes and sweetmeats and thus maintain a distinction from the Hindu festival.

Shopkeepers in Bengal introduce new account books (*hal khata*) on the Bengali new year's day, the first of Baisakh, which falls in the English month of April. In Khiruli some Moslem shopkeepers, if they can afford to, celebrate the day; but the villagers told me that the mullah felt annoyed when he saw this basically non-Islamic custom being practised by the Moslem.

The Moslem villagers appreciated the attitude of the mullah as they saw how ardently he tried to train them to understand what was non-Islamic.

Another villager, known to all as a shrewd and cunning man, was the only man in the village who read *tahajjud namaz*, the *namaz* read alone, never in congregation, early in the morning before *fajar namaz* (cf. *sura* : 17, *ayat* : 79 in the Koran). For this reason alone local Moslems held him in high esteem.

From the way in which Moslems judge the worth of an individual within their society, I find that, howsoever negligent the votaries might themselves be in following their ideal model of Islamic life, they appreciate in others, and even demand of them, the pursuit of the ideal. It seems that this unanimous attitude is the self-propelling device for maintaining their socio-cultural distinction.



## *Chapter 9*

### **Feasts and Festivals**

I shall describe here the feasts and festivals of the Moslem as I have observed them at Khiruli and the area around. Most of these are either village- or community-level observances. There are a few major Moslem feasts and festivals. Most of them are celebrated in commemoration of mythical events or occurrences in the historical past of the Islamic world. Codified information and instructions as regards different feasts and festivals are available.

The Islamic tradition maintains an overall uniformity in the different socio-religious practices and performances, and these are carried out by Moslems throughout the Islamic world. It also maintains the "induced solidarity" of the Moslem as a community. The source of all these practices is the Islamic sacred texts, the Koran and the Hadith. The texts form the ideal model. The tradition is embedded in the texts and has its own system of communication for making ordinary Moslems conscious of their faith, values, norms and ideals of life as depicted in the sacred texts. It also acts as the means of converting people from other religions.

The system of communication consists of six important parts:

- 1) Messages or themes to be communicated to the multitude. (These messages are in the sacred texts of the Koran and the Hadith in a codified form. The texts contain details of the devices to be utilized in carrying the messages);

- 2) Agents, namely *maulavi* or Islamic theologians, *khatib* or officiating mullahs in mosques, *kazi* or Moslem jurists. At times, learned *musafir* (i.e. travellers) visiting the village;
- 3) Seminaries, like *madrasah*, to get the agents trained and to make them aware of what they should practice,
- 4) Institutions such as mosques and *idgah*,
- 5) Formal occasions like *namaz* (also *milad* and *urs*) to bring commoners and agents together, and lastly
- 6) Formalized and systematic communication of ideas between agents and commoners through *khodba* and *woaz*. There are even formal customs to uplift the spirit of listeners, during *woaz* given by an agent. For example, the listeners are usually given the opportunity from time to time to recite *darud* (benediction) and *dowa* (supplication for the remission of sins) by way of getting them directly involved in the talk. This, on the one hand, breaks the monotony of listening and, on the other hand, makes listeners attentive during the service. This concerns formal communication between agents and commoners. There are, however, no rigid rules to be followed in informal converse between them.

*I have been alluding to the Islamic tradition and its constituent parts so many times in the different sections of this short discourse only because it is the mainspring in the internal mechanism maintaining social and cultural boundaries of the Moslem. This tradition helps them to assert their individual, as well as collective, identity and consequently builds a sense of social solidarity among them.*



The Moslem found themselves separated from the rest of the people in the area in their celebration of the standard Moslem feasts and festivals. The Hindu and the tribal did not participate with the Moslem in these festivals except as observers or as recipients of special festive alms, such as *fetra* or part of the meat from sacrificed animals in *Korbani* (see later). The clean caste Hindu, however, do not normally receive anything from the Moslem on such occasions. The tribals and the Hindu low castes have no such social taboo.

The outward aspect of the religio-social segregation of the Moslem from other communities is evident in the non-participation of the neighbouring communities in the Moslem feasts and festivals. This is very important, because it delineates clearly the boundaries that the Moslem erect through their endeavour to be exclusive.

The Hindu are capable of incorporating any community within their social structure. In the local context they do not recognize the separate entity of a community. To them, the identity of a community is relative to the position it holds in the local social hierarchy; but the internal mechanism previously mentioned, which is a manifestation of the tradition of Islam, tends to project the Moslem as a distinct entity outside the local hierarchy.

The Moslem festivals are held according to the lunar months of the Hijrah year. The Hijrah year is strictly lunar, and the months are adjusted to the course of the moon within a cycle of thirty years, containing nineteen common years of three hundred and fifty-four days and eleven intercalary years of three hundred and fifty-five days. Each year is divided into twelve months containing alternately thirty and twenty-nine days, with the exception of the last month of the intercalary years, which invariably contains thirty days. The intercalary years are the second, fifth, seventh, tenth, thirteenth, sixteenth, eighteenth, twenty-first, twenty-fourth, twenty-sixth and twenty-ninth of the cycle. The Hijrah months are not constructed on astronomical principles. Each month commences from the evening on which the new

moon is seen. Thus the duration of the months depends on the state of the weather. No month, however, can contain less than twenty-nine or more than thirty days. According to this system the night precedes the day. The following are the names of the months of the Hijrah year :-

- |                    |                                                   |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Muharram        | 7) Rajab                                          |
| 2) Safar           | 8) Shaban                                         |
| 3) Rabi-ul-Awwal   | 9) Ramazan                                        |
| 4) Rabi-ul-Akhir   | 10) Shawal                                        |
| 5) Jumada-ul-Awwal | 11) Zul Qad                                       |
| 6) Jumada-ul-Akhir | 12) Zul-Hajj (cf. Government of India 1914 : 115) |

The Hijrah year does not correspond to either the Bengali or the Western year. In general the Moslem in my area of study follow the Bengali calendar. There are no corresponding fixed dates and times for these festivals in the Bengali or the Western calendar. The table (Table 7) below shows the names of the major Moslem festivals celebrated in the area of study with their religious significance and the month during which they fall.

Moslems celebrate the birth anniversary of the prophet Mohammed. They also universally commemorate the death of the prophet each year on the twelfth of Rabi-ul-Awwal. In addition to these festivals, certain sections among the Moslem celebrate *Akhir Chahar Shambah* in commemoration of the prophet Mohammed's recovery from illness. This is held on the last Wednesday of the month of Safar. These are not observed with any elaboration among the Moslem in my area of study, except that *maktab* and *madrasahs* usually remain closed on these days. I will not include these minor Moslem observances in the ensuing description.

TABLE 7

## MAJOR MOSLEM FESTIVALS

Name of the festival	Date and month of the festival (according to Hijrah year)	Religious significance and other remarks
<i>Muharram</i>	In the month of Muharram	Commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussain, grandson of the prophet Mohammed.
<i>Sabe Barat</i>	Fourteenth Shaban	Literally means night of record. God on this night registers all actions people will perform during the ensuing year.
<i>Roza</i>	Whole month of Ramazan	The month of the Ramazan fast. During this month the holy Koran was revealed.
<i>Idu'l Fitr</i>	First Shawal	This festival marks the completion of the month-long fast of <i>Ramazan</i> , i.e. <i>Roza</i> .
<i>Idu'z Zuha</i> . Popularly the festival is known as <i>Baqrid</i> . Local people often call it <i>Korbani</i> or <i>Bara Id</i> .	Tenth Zul-Hajj	Commemoration of the prophet Ibrahim's willingness to offer his only son Ismail as a sacrifice in obedience to God's command.

### Muharram

The Moslem observe *Muharram* in commemoration of the prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussain. Hussain was murdered in the battle of Karbala in Arabia. I do not propose to narrate the historical event connected with it, but I would like to give a short description of the way *Muharram* is commemorated by the Moslem in my area of study.

*Muharram* is held in the first Moslem month of Muharram. It commences in the evening when the new moon becomes visible, the new moon indicating the beginning of the month of Muharram. The observance culminates on the tenth day of the month of Muharram and continues till the twelfth.

Although the Moslem commemorate the observance in order to show their grief for the cruel murder of Hussain in the plain of Karbala, there is often an element of merry-making in the performance. The observances differ from country to country. Different major sects such as *Shia* and *Sunni*, and different schools of thought (or religious schools), e.g. *Ahle Hadis*, observe *Muharram* in different ways. The observances are also different from region to region in India (See Shurreef 1832: 148 - 228 and Government of India 1914: 106 - 109).

As a mark of mourning for the sad demise of Hussain, the Moslem in the area of study do not shave or pare their nails from the evening on which *Muharram* starts till the tenth day of the month. Nor do they use soap or oil at the time of bathing during this period.

The Moslem in Khuruli and in other Moslem populated villages around Khuruli, as also in the neighbouring towns of Bolpur and Suri, arrange sham fights at the commencement of *Muharram* lasting till its last day. Staves of hard bamboo, flexible canes and sometimes sharp weapons like axes are used in the fight. The Moslem perform this with a view to representing the battle between Hussain and his enemy fought in the field of Karbala. They also beat drums (representing war-drums) during these

fight.

Every Moslem village or section of a village takes out a procession to various parts of the area. The various Moslem villages and hamlets inhabited by different Moslem groups come closer through these visits. The participants, however, visit not only Moslem villages or Moslem sections of villages, but also those of the Hindu. They exclude tribal hamlets from their visits. Although the Moslem go very enthusiastically to Hindu villages and hamlets with their procession, one can easily perceive an air of aloofness in the Hindu response to such visits. The Hindu usually play the role of a passive observer. In contrast, when the Moslem pass through Moslem inhabited areas, there is an active response. The people visited join in and share equally the spirit of the rite. In short, the response is wholehearted and meaningful.

These different receptions that the Moslem experience help them at both the individual and community levels to distinguish their kind from the rest of the heterogeneous population, and to discover their identity as a separate entity. They perceive the limits of their social and culture boundaries *vis-a-vis* those of the neighbouring communities.

During *Muharram*, the display of *tazia* is also part of the observance. *Tazia* is a symbolic representation of the mausoleum erected on the plains of Karbala over the remains of Hussain. It is prepared by covering a framework made of strips of bamboo with pieces of paper neatly clipped and pasted on it. It is further decorated with different kinds of coloured paper cutouts of flowers, horses with wings, tinsel fringes, etc. Moslem villagers in the area devote a lot of time, often days or even months together, in preparing large and elegant *tazia*. There is often considerable competition among the Moslem of different villages or sections within a single village in the preparation of large and highly decorated *tazia*.

Moslems take out a special procession with *tazia* on the tenth day of *Muharram*. A large number of such processions in my area of study end at a village named Khustikuri (Illambazaar police

station) situated about ten miles west of Khiruli. Khustikuri has a *mazar* (Moslem shrine) of a renowned local *Pir*. Many Moslems of the area visit this village on the tenth day of *Muharram* to see the processions and the *tazia* as well as the *mazar*

The Moslem at Khiruli took out a procession with a *tazia* in the year 1966. In subsequent years the villagers were not able to prepare a *tazia* due to lack of funds, but they took out processions without the *tazia*. The framework of the *tazia* prepared in 1966 was, however, utilized the next year to prepare a *tazia* to sell to the residents of another village.

I noticed that some old Moslems at Khiruli resented the joyous way in which *Muharram* was being commemorated. They disliked the making and displaying of *tazia*. They also did not like sham fights, the beating of drums and playing of musical instruments. They considered these to be anti-Islamic frivolities. However, I found that the young and the number of older people who enjoyed these things considerably outnumbered the old dissidents.

As is usual, anyone who takes part in the *Muharram* procession goes barefoot. The Moslem in such processions sing songs in lamentation for the sad demise of Hussain. At intervals they squat, jump, beat their breasts and shout the name of Hussain, demonstrating their indignation for the incident that happened at Karbala. This action is locally known as *matam*. Children as well as grown-up boys take part very enthusiastically in *matam* and in the singing. To learn the numerous songs for the occasion eager Moslem villagers buy printed copies of booklets in Bengali full of "*Muharram* songs" sold, as the occasion approaches, at local fairs (*mela*) or in the market.

### Sabe Barat

*Sabe Barat* falls on the fourteenth of the month of Shaban. The Moslem believe that God on this night registers all the actions people will perform during the ensuing year. Learned and devout Moslems of both sexes regard this as an important occasion and

honour it by sitting up all night reading the Koran. At Khiruli only a few spend the whole night reciting the Koran.

There is another Moslem ceremony of this kind known as *Sabe-i-Miraj* which precedes *Sabe Barat* and is observed in the seventh month, Rajab. According to Islamic tradition *Sabe-i-Miraj* is the night of the prophet Mohammed's ascent or nocturnal journey to heaven on a supernatural horse called *buraq*. It is said to have taken place on the night preceding the twenty-seventh day of the month of Rajab. The Moslem, especially the erudite and the devout, commemorate this event by sitting up all night praying and reading or listening to the numerous written narratives concerning it.

### Roza

*Roza* or the ceremonial fast for a month during the ninth lunar month of Ramazan is one of the cardinal duties (*i.e. farz*) in Islam. Express injunctions regarding it are given in the Koran (see *sura* : 2, *ayat* : 185). Moslems, both male and female, normally observe each day of the Ramazan month as one of strict fasting from pre-dawn to sunset. The sick, the aged, pregnant women or women breast-feeding infants, however, are exempt from the actual necessity of fasting during *Ramazan*.

The commencement of every fast day is preceded by the performance of *niyet*, a vow to keep the fast. It is traditional (or *sunna*) for the Moslem who fasts to take an early morning (pre-dawn) breakfast or *siori*. There are certain specific rules that one must or should observe during the fast.

In the evening, immediately before prayer and just after the call of *azan* is over, they break their fast. They call this *eftar*. They say *niyet*, a vow for breaking the fast.

One of the most important observances during the month by the fasting Moslem is the reading of *taraweeh namaz*. Women do not, however, read this *namaz*. There are twenty *rekat*, *i.e. sura*, in the *taraweeh* (locally pronounced as *tarabi*). This prayer is read in congregations in mosques at the time of *aesa*, *i.e.* late evening

prayer. It precedes the last three *weter rekat* of *azsa*. It is customary among the Moslem who fast to say the *taraweeh* each day for the whole month of Ramazan, reading through the whole Koran in that period. The imam leading the *taraweeh* has to know the Koran by heart. Thus Moslems prefer to employ a *Hajiz* (explained in Chapter 10) as an imam. When the whole Koran has been read through the *taraweeh* can be discontinued.

To be more specific about the observance of the ceremony, let us see how the Moslem at Khiruli village celebrate the month of Ramazan. As regards fasting, women are more particular than men. Almost all the adult women at Khiruli observe *Roza*, unless they are sick or otherwise unable to undertake it or are commanded by Koranic injunctions not to keep *Roza* or fast. Only a little more than fifty per cent of the adult males fast however. The general reasons for not keeping the fast, especially among the males, are sickness and overwork. The poor Moslem of Khiruli, working as *munsh*, *kisan* and *mahendar*, maintain that they cannot fast because of their long hours of work.

Although children are exempt as a rule from the fasting, some of them fast occasionally with their elders for a day or two. A few devout youths take keen interest in fasting.

The Moslem who fast become more particular than usual about reading *namaz*. Some more learned than others read and recite the Koran during the day time or at night.

The villagers who keep *Roza* try to take their early morning breakfast (*siori*) at the appropriate time, which they come to know from charts sent by the local madrasah. These charts show the scheduled time of *iftar* as well as *siori* for each day of the month of Ramazan. As the timing of *siori* and *iftar* is related to sunrise and sunset, it varies a little each day. The charts also contain other instructions concerning *Roza* and the ensuing ceremony of *Idu'l Fitr*. These charts are usually displayed at the entrance of the mosque, so that anyone who wants may consult them. The time schedules are given in the Moslem almanac too.

A considerable number of the village Moslem, each bringing



his own food, gather at the village mosque for *eflar*. Some bring their children with them. Some old people bring their grandchildren. Relatives and friends irrespective of their social position exchange food as an informal gesture of kinship or friendship. If a *musafir* or traveller comes at the time of *eflar*, he too gets a share of food from others. They get through their *eflar* quickly in order to join the early evening prayer, i.e. *magrib namaz*, after which they disperse to eat more heartily at home, before gathering again in the mosque to say *uesu* and especially *taraweesh* prayers.

Some of these villagers distribute *sinni* after the prayers, usually among the people gathered for the *taraweesh*. Many distribute *sinni* after the *taraweesh* following the completion of their reading of the Koran. Many wait to distribute *sinni* until they complete their reading of the Koran. This particular *taraweesh* is locally called *khatam taraweesh*, which literally means completion of the *taraweesh*. *Sinni* is also distributed by many on the twenty-seventh of the Ramazan month for the following reason. Moslems especially celebrate the twenty-seventh night of Ramazan. This night is literally known as the night of power (see *sura* : 97, *ayat*: 3 of the Koran for reference). On this night the devout spend the whole night reading the Koran. It is the belief of the local Moslem that on this night all creation at some moment bows in humble adoration to the Almighty (also see Shurreef 1832 : 258-259).

The *khatib* of the village mosque, especially if he is a *Hafiz*, leads the *taraweesh*. In recognition of his service during the *taraweesh* the Moslem villagers of Khiruli usually present him a gift of one hundred and fifty rupees. This sum they raise either by subscription or by selling the paddy given away by the rich as *wasar*. In the year 1967 and 1969 there was no *khatib* in the mosque. The villagers employed a *maulavi* from a local madrasah to perform the duty of an imam in the month of Ramazan, especially for the *namaz taraweesh*. He was a *Hafiz* as well as a *Kari* (explained in Chapter 10). He charged two hundred rupees on each occasion for his services.

From the above description of *Roza* we find that the majority

of the village Moslem are involved in fasting, taking *siori*, performing *eftar* and reading *taraweeh*, year after year, during the month of Ramazan. This has a great impact on the minds of individual Moslems and on the Moslem community as a whole. A natural tendency arises at both individual and collective levels to keep up the tradition of fasting. This urge is not limited to the actual participants only but is shared by every other member of the community.

### Idu'l Fitr

The day after the month of Ramazan, *i.e.* the first day of the tenth month of Shawal, is ceremoniously observed as *Idu'l Fitr*. It marks the end of the month-long fast or *Roza*.

On this day each local Moslem family which can afford to distributes among the poor two and a half seers of rice (or the equivalent in money) for each member of the donor family, including new-born babies, if any. This is *fetra*. According to Islamic tradition all well-to-do Moslems have to give *fetra*. In other words *fetra* is *wajib* for such individuals. (*i.e.* should be performed by the followers of Islam)

After taking a bath in the morning and before going for *Id namaz*, the Moslem weigh and put aside the rice to be given away as *fetra*. At Khiruli the head of the family usually undertakes this responsibility.

A portion of the "*fetra* rice" is often distributed among poor villagers, mendicants and beggars immediately after the *Id* prayer. Some Moslems in my area of study carry rice in plates or in bowls to the *idgah* for distribution after the prayer. A large concourse of poor people gather outside the *idgah* to receive alms.

At Khiruli the poor Santal from the neighbouring tribal hamlet, Rahamatpur Majhi Para, and a few Oraons (locally called Dhangar) from the nearby village Radhakestapur gather outside the *idgah* for the special alms of *fetra*. Also there are poor Hindu children of low caste who wait to receive alms.

Besides distributing *fetra*, which on this occasion is *wajib*, the Moslem should read two *rekat* of *Id* prayer. According to the sacred rule of Islam this is also *wajib*.

The *namaz* is to be read between seven or eight a.m. and noon, and not on any account after that time.

The Moslem wear new clothes for going to the *idgah*. Some wear special scarves, brought from Mecca, on their shoulders. The Moslem villagers usually take particular care to perfume their clothes and body with *atar* or scented oil on this occasion. Moslem children wearing gaudy clothes gather with their elders in the *idgah*. Young boys try to imitate their elders by joining in the prayer and doing everything the others do. Before praying, some villagers burn incense in the *idgah* and upon the tombs of their near relatives.

Devout Moslems usually repeat *takbir* while proceeding from their homes to the *idgah* for saying *Id namaz*.

It is *sunna* (traditional and customary) for the Moslem to attentively listen to *khodba*. After the *khodba*, *monajat* (supplication for the remission of sins) is read. Before leaving the *idgah* after the prayer, the *khodba* and the *monajat* being over, Moslems solicitate each other by embracing and shaking hands. Some people shake hands with the imam and give him a present, according to their means, of one or two rupees, or sometimes less. The imam who led the *taraweeh namaz* in the preceding month of Ramazan usually performs the duty of imam on the occasion of *Id namaz*.

On the day of *Idu'l Fitr* Moslems wear new clothes. At Khiruli the Moslem buy new clothes not only for their respective families but also for their poor relatives living within or outside the village. Servants are also given new clothes. Moslem villagers of Khiruli employed as agricultural domestic servants in the homes of local Hindus often persuade their masters to buy them new clothes for this day, although the Hindu usually buy new clothes both for themselves and for their servants for the yearly celebration of *Durga Puja* held in the Bengali month of Aswin (September to October).

Besides wearing new clothes on the day of *Idu'l Fitr*, each Moslem family prepares sweetened *semui*, vermicelli with milk, sugar, raisins and dried and sliced coconut

The actual ceremony of *Idu l Fitr* helps maintain the boundaries and separate identity of the Moslem community. On this occasion, prayer is *farz* (a must). Further it is traditional (or *sunna*) for the Moslem to read the *farz rekāt* of their daily prayers in congregation, but the daily round of duties scarcely allows them time to do all this (see below The Sacred Institutions). In the villages all male Moslems make it a rule to gather for prayer on the festive day of *Id*. Through this community prayer the villagers realize their common affiliation to a single, identical religion. Though there may be internal discord and though there certainly are differences in class, rank, status and age, on this day and in this prayer gathering they are all made to feel equal. They come together for the same purpose and, to all appearances, greet one another without inhibition. It must be stressed that this Islamic principle of equality practised in their sacred life does not extend beyond it. The everyday social life of the Moslem maintains its distinctions of class and status rigidly. This is because the Koran and the Hadith have copious codified rules for religious life but comparatively few for the secular.

### Idu'z Zuha

This is the last annual Moslem ceremony according to the lunar year, Hijrah. It is also called *Baqrid* or *Bara Id* or *Korbanı*. It begins on the tenth day of Zul-Hajj and lasts three days. The principal ceremony, however, is usually completed on the tenth. This festival, according to Moslem scripture, is to commemorate Ibrahim's (i.e. Abraham's) willingness to offer up his only son as a sacrifice in obedience to God's command.

Like *Idu'l Fitr*, the ceremony of *Idu z Zuha* also requires the reading of an *Id* prayer in the *idgah*. The details of the rules and the performance of these two *Id* prayers are identical, except that on *Idu'z Zuha* some Moslems fast until the prayer. To mark *iftar* or

completion of the fast, Moslems sometimes eat rice-flour bread with roasted meat of the animal sacrificed on this occasion

The Moslem in my area of study tend to get the reading of this *Id namaz* over quickly, so as to get on sooner to the more interesting, though long-winded ceremony of sacrificing animals. Unlike the practice in *Idul Fitri*, the Moslem on this occasion do not usually spend large sums of money on new clothes.

*Idul'z Zuha* is observed among all Moslems, both as a day of sacrifice and as a great festival. It is also a part of the rites of Meccan pilgrimage. It is based on an injunction in the Koran, (*sura* 22, *ayat* 34-37)

In these verses the reason for Islamic sacrifice has been explained. It is said that the sacrifice is not for the propitiation of the higher power, because God does not delight in flesh or blood. It is more a symbol behind which there is a deep spiritual meaning.

God has given man power over beast and has permitted him to eat meat, but only when man pronounces His name in the act of taking life does he become aware of the sanctity of life. By this solemn invocation, man is further reminded that wanton cruelty should not motivate his killing.

The animals generally offered for sacrifice, such as camels, cows, bulls, goats and sheep are, moreover, useful in many ways, some for giving milk, others as mounts or for carrying burden, the cattle are useful as draught animals; the sheep's wool can be woven into blankets; and all these animals are good meat. In short, according to the Koranic text (*sura* 22, *ayat* . 33), "In them ye have benefits" (Ali n.d. . 859). It, however, they are used for sacrifice, for the sake of satisfying the needs of the poor by sharing with them the greater part of the meat, they become a symbol of man's willingness to give up some of his goods in charity. According to Moslem theologians this practical expression of benevolence is the virtue the Koran seeks to teach. The actual Koranic verse (*sura* : 22, *ayat* : 37) says, "It is not their meat nor their blood that reaches unto God : it is piety on your part that reaches Him" (see *ibid.* . 861).

Let us now consider the actual ceremony of sacrifice. Each Moslem irrespective of sex should sacrifice an animal, if it can be afforded. It may be a goat, sheep or *dumba* (i.e. broad tailed sheep), camel or cow. This rite is *wajib*. Those who cannot afford such a sacrifice are as a rule exempt. A group of seven persons need offer as sacrifice only one animal, if the animal is a big one, a cow or a camel for instance.

It is *farz* or a must to say *niyet* before slaying the animal. Except for the hide, the sacrificed animal is divided into three portions, one-third being given to relations, one-third to the poor, and the remaining one-third reserved for the family.

In the years 1966 and 1968, thirty-three and thirty-one cows were slaughtered respectively at Khiruli on the day of *Korbanī*. No small animal such as a goat or a sheep was slaughtered. The Moslem of Khiruli say that as a group of seven persons could collectively offer a cow, it becomes less expensive than seven small animals such as goats or sheep. Due to this, these small animals are not usually sacrificed on this occasion. More than half the total of Moslem families of the village made the sacrifice in the years mentioned above.

The sacrifice is performed at selected sites within the village. There are six such places in Khiruli. All the village men, boys and children get involved in holding and skinning animals and in dressing and dividing the meat into shares. Care is taken not to spoil the hide while skinning. Although skinning, dressing and dividing into shares is laborious work, it is done with enthusiasm and is finished by the afternoon. On its completion an auction is arranged within the village to sell the hides. Money procured by selling the hides is given to the local madrasah.

The most communal part of this rite of sacrifice is the distribution of meat to all Moslem households within the village and to relatives within and even outside the village. The poorest family in the village gets a share of the sacrificial meat.

The Santal of the neighbouring hamlet at Rahamatpur come and share the meat put aside for the poor. Certain devout

Moslems at Khiruli, however, dislike giving them a share. They say that the Santal often enjoy meat with wine, but wine is *haram* or unlawful according to the sacred text. They cannot bear the thought of the Santal eating the meat of *Korbani* with wine.

Most families of the village, especially the poor, keep a portion of their meat apart to dry in the sun for future consumption.

The Moslem of Khiruli are often superfluously tradition bound. They say that they would have preferred to sacrifice *dumba* and camel, only because these are known to be sacrificial animals in Arabia, the country of the origin of their religion. However, as these animals are costly in this country, they cannot afford them for sacrifice.

Some local innovations are often found creeping into different Moslem feasts and festivals. For instance, because God commanded Ibrahim to offer up his beloved son Ismail as sacrifice, the Moslem villagers think that they should sacrifice animals particularly dear to them. Some buy sacrificial animals a year before *Korbani*, so that by the time the animals are offered for sacrifice they have become cherished pets.

Before concluding this section on feasts and festivals of the Moslem, I would like to mention another local innovation, *mussalli*. On this occasion a villager invites the other regular mosque-going villagers to eat with him. The Moslem of Khiruli practise this, they say, to earn merit. The invitation is either announced in the mosque after a *Jumma* prayer or personally sent to each family. The invitation is announced after a *Jumma* prayer because many more come for this particular prayer. More often the feast takes place directly after *Jumma* prayer in the courtyard of the mosque. All villagers, ignoring local factions, join in these "sacred" feasts and dine together, although on any other occasion they are selective in deciding with whom they would eat. I observed at Khiruli that these *mussalli* with interdining of rival factions often had the effect of reducing tensions between them.

Moslem feasts and festivals only marginally affect the Hindu community. The upper castes take no part whatsoever in the

festivals. The low castes and tribals, however, participate in so far as they accept alms that are being distributed. The Hindu low castes see nothing amiss in accepting "*jetra* rice", as uncooked rice is considered non-polluting.

Through the observance of these feasts and festivals the Khiruli Moslem experience that communal solidarity and unity which is a particular feature of the tradition of Islam. They often speak of the world-wide distribution of their brethren. They like to recall that they, too, practise these Islamic rites and rituals. They feel some sort of fellowship with them through the practice of these rites. This consciousness of there being others of similar mind all over the world makes the Moslem strive the more to maintain their boundaries, in order to be one with the far-flung Pan-Islamic brotherhood.



## Chapter 10

### The Sacred Institutions

#### Mosque

Of all the sacred institutions in Islam, I shall first deal here with the prominently observable Moslem institution of the mosque (see Koranic *sura* : 9, *ayat* : 17 and 18). The mosque or *masjid* is usually an identifiable landmark locating a Moslem village. In my area of study I found no Moslem village without a mosque situated within the village or at least nearby.

The mosque, "a place for prostration" (Grunebaum 1976 : 9), is primarily a meeting-place to which Moslems are prescribed by their religion to come to pray together five times daily. The appropriate time of prayer is customarily announced from the mosque. Sometimes a whole village or even several villages form the congregation of a mosque. A portion of the premises is commonly utilized for the *maktab* ; it also serves as a shelter for *musafir* . Inside every mosque there is a semicircular recess in the western wall. The Moslem face this recess when they pray. A *minar*, or a high tower, for *azan* forms part of the structure of a mosque. In the absence of such a tower, a raised place or platform is used for the purpose.

The mosque is usually maintained by the combined efforts of the Moslem living in the village. In my area of study the mosque normally has one paid *khatib* . He lives in the mosque. His duties are to lead the prayers and to announce the time of the prayer by calling *azan*. On each *Jumma* day, the *khatib* read *Jumma khodba* and, if he so wishes, delivers *woaz*. His duties further entail the running of the *maktab* in the mosque.

In addition to the mosque, the other prominent landmark one often comes across in a Moslem village is the *idgah*. The *idgah*, too,

is a place of prayer. Twice in a year on the occasion of the two *Id* ceremonies the Moslem congregate within its open arena, which often has the same semicircular recess on the western side and sometimes has a boundary wall

With this generalized information, let us now look at the particular situation in Khiruli

The mosque at the centre of the village of Khiruli was built about seventy years ago out of clay. In the fifties, it was rebuilt in brick by the combined efforts of the Moslem of the village. In the late sixties they fenced their village *idgah* with brick walls. The expenditure incurred was shared among them. The rich people gave as donations relatively large sums of money or paid in paddy. The very poor people were exempt from giving anything. Those, however, who could do so gave free labour when it was needed. For occasional expenditure like repairs or buying necessary items for the mosque, the villagers raise subscriptions among themselves. The Moslem villagers select from among themselves a few respected, elderly and economically sound members whose job is to decide the share of each villager in any joint undertaking.

The necessary items bought by villagers are: collapsible wooden stands (*rehel*) specifically for holding copies of the Koran and other religious books which are kept ready for use in the mosque, galvanized iron buckets and aluminium *badna* (small jugs with spouts but no handles) for the water which is to be collected from the pond alongside the mosque for *wazu* (ablutions), a few mats and *sataranchi* (rough carpets) to be used as *zainamaz* (prayer rugs), and, for knowing the exact time of the prayer, a wall-clock fixed high up on the wall inside the mosque.

The *khatib* lodges in a small room within the mosque. He is given breakfast and two meals daily and a monthly remuneration of thirty to thirty-five rupees (it must have considerably increased by now). Each Moslem family, except the poorest, provides his meals in turn. These families also give a fixed sum of money each month, from twenty-five paise to one rupee and fifty paise according to their means, to meet his stipend.

Besides the *khatib*, whoever comes and stays in the mosque as a *musafir* is usually provided with food by one of the villagers.

### Namaz

In an endeavour to understand the underlying and basic significance of the institution of mosques we need a knowledge of the Islamic prayer system. I call it a system because it is a complex whole, constituted and organized with a set of connected principles for procedure.

There is a vast number of rules to be followed by a Moslem when saying his prayers or *namaz*. The rules are elaborate, and deal even with such matters as how much space there should be between a person's legs when he stands for prayer; or how a person should sit while praying. Certain rules vary according to the sex of the person who prays. I do not intend to go into these in detail. They are codified rules of the tradition of Islam. The lay Moslem, although conscious of the existence of these rules in their religion, are not always aware of the underlying meanings of all these practices; yet they maintain a strikingly rigid uniformity.

All Islamic rules and regulations bearing on the multitude of religious and social practices are usually categorized into certain broad divisions. Some are "musts" (*i.e. farz*) and others "shoulds" (*wajib*); still others are traditional, said to have been practised by the Prophet Mohammed. The latter are *sunnat* and are also obligatory. There are some, the practice of which is voluntary. These are known as *nafl*. Again there are some categorized as "absolutely not to be done" and "better not to be done". These are *haram* and *makruh* respectively.

Prayers are obligatory or *farz* for the Moslem. The Moslem offer *namaz* five times a day (cf. Koranic injunctions *sura* : 11, *ayat* : 114; *sura* : 17, *ayat* : 78; *sura* : 20, *ayat* : 130 and *sura* : 30, *ayat* : 17 and 18). Each prayer is named after the particular hour when it is meant to be read. The hours for *namaz* vary according to the season.

A specified number of *rekat* are read in Arabic at the time of *namaz*. *Sura Fateha* which is popularly known as *Alhamdo* (the first word of the *sura Fateha*) should be read in every *namaz*. During each *namaz* an appropriate number of *rekat* are offered as *farz*, *sunnat*, *nafl* or *weter* (locally pronounced *beter*) by the devotees.

When in congregation, the Moslem are prescribed by their tradition to read those *rekat* which are *farz*. When the Moslem offer the *farz rekāt* they always stand behind an imam and simply listen to him while he recites the appropriate *rekāt*. The *khatib* normally performs the duty of an imam in this region. In his absence a suitable substitute is selected as an imam from among the persons gathered for prayer.

In such congregations the calling of *azan* before or at the time of praying is also regarded as a traditional custom for the Moslem. Any person appointed to perform the duty of calling out *azan* is called *mowazin*. As in *namaz*, prescribed rules are followed concerning the time and manner of giving the call for prayers. *Azan* is called out in Arabic.

In the area of study the *khatib* acts as *mowazin*. In his absence or when otherwise required, any villager knowing how to call out *azan* performs this duty. *Azan* is usually called out about fifteen minutes before the actual time of prayer, so that people hearing it can get ready.

Before prayer, Moslems perform ablutions or *wazu* and this is done according to prescribed Islamic rules (see express injunctions regarding *wazu* in the Koran *sura* : 5, *ayat* : 7,). *Wazu* is locally pronounced by illiterate Moslems as *uju*. *Wazu* is also obligatory for anyone calling *azan*. An individual must read a *niyet* before *wazu*. *Niyet* is a formal way of making a person's intention, or vow, known to God, when about to do a religious duty.

Although it is traditional to read *farz namaz* (i.e. *farz rekāt* of the *namaz*) in a congregation, in fact only a handful of Moslem villagers come regularly throughout the year for five times a day to pray together in the mosque. This is because only a small number of male members among the Moslem obey the fundamental

(*farz*) rule of daily reading of the *namaz* five times. This attitude has often been severely criticized by the Moslem themselves. Those at fault give the excuse that, being poor farmers or labourers, they cannot devote the prescribed time for *namaz*.

The majority of Moslem women, however, are particular in offering their daily prayers. They read *namaz* at home since, in my area of study, they do not go to a congregation for the purpose.

In Khiruli, approximately twenty men, mostly elderly except for a few youths, were regular in *namaz* five times daily. Of these twenty men, about a dozen came to the mosque and the rest prayed either at home or at their place of work. The persons who offered *namaz* at home but could have come without inconvenience to the mosque were often condemned by the regular mosque-goers.

### Jumma Namaz

*Jumma namaz*, a special *namaz* for males held each Friday in the mosque in lieu of the regular midday prayer (*zahar namaz*), attracts about seventy-five percent of the male villagers in my area of study. Young boys just beginning to learn to offer *namaz* are usually enthusiastic in coming and joining the special congregation in the mosque on this day. Before coming for this *namaz*, bath is *sunnat*, i.e. traditionally essential; and all Moslems who come for the *namaz* bathe and generally wear clean clothes. Some even have cotton balls scented with oil (*atar*) in their ears. After *Jumma namaz* they often distribute *sinni* (eatables) in the name of God. A host of small children crowd around the entrance of the mosque on these occasions to get a bit of *sinni*.

On *Jumma* day the imam reads out *khodba* before the *farz rekat*. After reading out *khodba*, the imam, if he desires, can give a sermon in local dialect on an appropriate theme. For instance, on the Friday that precedes some Moslem festival, the imam may give a sermon on the relevance of the ensuing ceremony, after reading the *khodba*. He may point out how they should perform

the ceremony, i.e. the appropriate rules and practices that they should follow, how they should conduct themselves and what they should or must not practise during the festival.

Like *Jumma namaz*, *Id namaz* held during *Id* ceremonies brings together many Moslems. The *namaz* is usually read by all male villagers. Even a sick person, if he can walk with the aid of a stick, comes and joins the *namaz* with others at the *idgah*. As on *Jumma* day, a bath is essential before *Id namaz*. Then the imam delivers the *Id khodba*.

So far I have dealt with two visible Islamic institutions, namely the mosque and *idgah*, and have described the conspicuously distinctive prayer system of the Moslem.

This description brings into relief the way the Moslem conform to the prescribed rules and regulations governing religious beliefs, practices and duties, in order to be faithful followers of their religion. It also shows that these rules are meticulously defined, codified and stored in the texts of the Koran and the Hadith.

In the ensuing pages, I intend to describe the educational institutions of the Moslem and how professional theologians are locally trained. I shall describe the educational institutions under the heading of "sacred institutions", because these institutions offer special training and instructions in Islamic tradition, theology and law. These are the only formal centres for the local Moslem to get trained as professional theologians or mullahs.

### **Maktab**

*Maktab* or seminaries are usually maintained along with mosques. Here children are taught preliminary Arabic, the language of the sacred texts of the Moslem. They also learn Urdu. For basic Urdu and Arabic the books *Kayeda* and *Ampara* (or *Ansupara*) are used respectively. After the completion of these two preliminary books, students are generally given the Koran to read in the original Arabic. This sudden jump from the preliminary to a

much higher level makes it almost impossible for students to master adequately the language of the Koran.

Students are given meticulous training in Khiruli in the correct reading of *namaz*. They learn how to make the appropriate *iiyet* for each religious performance and how to do *wazu* properly. They also learn the correct way of greeting. They are taught how to behave at the time of listening to *khodba* and how to recite the appropriate *dowa* and *darud*.

In general students take personal copies of books like *Kayeda*, *Ampara* or the Koran to the *maktab*. Those who are poor share copies of books with others. Copies of the Koran kept in the village mosques are frequently used by students and teachers in the *maktab*. As the Koran must always be read from a *rehel*, students reading the Koran also carry *rehel*.

The *khatib* employed in the mosque usually teaches in the *maktab* attached to it, as this is one of his duties.

Girls are more frequent than boys among *maktab*-goers. It is a prestigious qualification for local Moslem women to know how to read the Koran. Consequently I found that more women than men knew how to read the Koran among the local Moslem.

In Khiruli the *maktab* attached to the mosque is run by its *khatib*. The class in the *maktab* begins after *zahar namaz* and continues until the time for the *asar namaz* (afternoon prayer). On Fridays the *maktab* remains closed. There were thirty-nine regular *maktab*-going students of the age group of eight to twelve years in 1968. Of them only ten were boys. During the absence of the *khatib*, an aged Moslem who knew Arabic and Urdu took charge of running the *maktab*.

In 1969 a housewife in Khiruli began running a separate *maktab* at her residence. During my stay in the village I found that her *maktab* became very popular, mainly because parents and guardians did not like to send their grown-up girls to the *maktab* in the mosque. The teaching hours in the housewife's *maktab* were adjusted to suit the majority of the students. Hours were usually from eight to ten in the morning and two to three in the afternoon.

The lady did not take any fixed fee for giving lessons, but parents and guardians helped her on a regular monthly basis according to their means.

### Madrasah and Schools of Theological Learning

Beyond this village-level educational centre, the *maktab*, there is the madrasah. In the area under review, madrasahs are very few. There are only two such institutions, one situated in Suri town about fifteen miles away. People trained in madrasahs are also very few in the locality.

The authorities of these institutions keep contact with the villagers in this region. They send their teachers to different villages where they deliver sermons (*woaz*) in mosques, in the local dialect. They mail printed programmes and pamphlets to all mosques within the area before various Moslem festivals. These programmes and pamphlets contain appropriate timings for the beginning or completion of different rites, along with instructions about what to do and what not to do during particular ceremonies. In lieu of this service, the madrasahs expect financial support from the villagers for the assistance of poor students in their hostels. The students in these institutions are given free tuition, board and lodging. Students who can afford formal school education usually do not take up studies in the madrasah. No girl student is admitted there.

Each year the money obtained by selling the hides of animals slaughtered on the day of the *Korbani* is sent by the Moslem villagers of Khiruli to the madrasah at Suri. Individual families and persons donate money to the madrasah when students visit villages to collect funds.

The two institutions referred to above ideally try to follow the *Deobandi* school of theological learning. It professes to follow liberalism and reform while maintaining Islamic rules. In contrast the *Barelvi*, the followers of Sayyad Ahmad Barelvi, are orthodox. The *Deobandi* are said to be liberal. They have admitted the change or rather the naturalization that Islam has undergone in



India. They are condemned by others as being influenced by factors and forces outside Islam. They have incorporated into their theology various mystical elements (often imbued with superstitions) practised by different *Pir*. The *Barelvi* criticize these as un-Islamic and outside their *shariat*.

Students trained in institutions attempting to follow the school of *Barelvi* are often found not to follow its orthodox teaching, but to believe in and practise the different customs, acts and duties of the more influential *Deobandi* school. Even some of their teachers, in practice, are *Deobandi*.

The ordinary Moslem do not fully understand these differences. The majority of Moslems in the area are *Hanafi*. In practice they are more *Deobandi* than *Barelvi*. The local *Ahele Hadis*, however, come closer to the *Barelvi* in both their ideology and practices, but they are not *Barelvi*, because they claim that they only follow Islamic tradition and belong to no school but their own. On the other hand, they apparently show a liberal outlook in saying that they are open to change or can give up any rule of the Koran or the Hadith if it is shown to be fallible in the present circumstances.

In the adjacent district of Murshidabad the *Ahele Hadis* are found in large numbers. They have a slightly better rate of literacy and a slightly higher economic standard than the Moslem of Birbhum District. They have a better network of madrasahs through which they coherently maintain their school of thought. In contrast to the self-conscious attitude of the *Ahele Hadis* who claim to conform to a special school of their own, the majority of the *Hanafi* are not precise about their adherence to any particular school, *Deobandi* or *Barelvi*. They practise a system of Islamic religion that is close to *Deobandi*. The presence of a large number of *Ahele Hadis* in the nearby district of Murshidabad, however, has indirectly influenced the *Hanafi* so that they follow ideologically the *Barelvi* school of thought, which is to a great extent similar to that of the *Ahele Hadis*.

This account regarding the adherence of the Moslem of my area of study to the schools of theological learning is based on

information from a few mullahs of the area. From their account the significant fact that emerges is their ambiguity regarding membership in a particular school (*Deobandi*) and their perception of the *Barelvi* school, which in fact forms their reference group, as 'other'.

The *Hanafi*, being the majority in my area of study, often criticize and mock the *Ahele Hadis* for maintaining certain customs of their own. In the social context, however, the boundary between these two religious schools is very tenuous, because in Khiruli and other nearby villages the villagers who profess the *Hanafi* faith frequently intermarry with the *Ahele Hadis*. The villagers in Khiruli even found nothing sacrilegious in appointing an *Ahele Hadis* as *khatib* for about a year (between 1967 and 1968) in their local mosque.

Let me now complete the description of the madrasah. In the local madrasahs, students are taught different subjects, such as elementary English and arithmetic, geography, history, Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Islamic theology. Except for the theology and the languages, namely Arabic, Urdu and Persian, required to adequately study it, the other subjects are not seriously taught. In order to complete the course on Islamic theology, students must read the Koran and a few books on the Hadith written by different Islamic theologians. They read books concerned with explanations (*tafsir*) of the Koran, written in either Urdu or Persian.

A seminar on selected religious topics is held each Friday. In the seminar, students are trained to deliver eloquent speeches on different religious practices, duties and traditions which are compulsory for followers of Islam. They are taught how to persuade people using logic and thus induce them to follow the correct tradition of Islam. They are also trained to efficiently arbitrate and quote the appropriate principle when any conflict of opinion arises regarding rites, duties and the tradition of Islam.

Besides these regular seminars on Fridays, a bigger seminar

(i.e. *jalsu* or *milad*) is sometimes arranged. On these occasions, wise theologians of the *Deobandi* and *Barelvi* groups often debate on different religious issues. Students are encouraged to participate in these debates.

After successful completion of the course in madrasahs, students are awarded the title of *maulavi*. A *maulavi* who knows the Koran by heart is given the title of *Hafiz*. If he learns to read the Koran with perfect pronunciation and accent, he is awarded the title of *Kari*. A *maulavi* may have both the titles

Students graduating from the local madrasahs as *maulavi* are employed either as *khatib* in mosques, or as teachers in madrasahs or schools where one or more of the appropriate languages, Urdu, Arabic and Persian, are taught. If, however, they wish to pursue yet higher studies, they are required to go to bigger institutions, the highest for the *Deobandi* being the madrasah at Deobund and that for the *Barelvi* being the one at Bareilly, both in Uttar Pradesh.

The above study shows the training that a person undergoes to become a professional Moslem theologian. Looking back over what I have written of these institutions, it becomes evident that the local Moslem are in constant touch with one or other of these trained professionals, in the mosque and *idgah* on the one hand and in the *maktab* and madrasah on the other. With the help of these organized channels of communication, the professionals make their flock conscious of Islam and its practices. They do this either formally through the institutions of *khodba* and *woaz*, or as specialists through direct informal conversation with the people. They also train their own kind, namely the future theologians of the madrasahs.

### Milad

There are only a handful of professional theologians and learned men among the Moslem in the area of my field work; and they extend help to their large Moslem community by interpreting and evaluating the Koranic and Hadith texts for them. They do this using the organized methods I have described above and

through certain other means, such as popular gatherings, namely *milad* (or *jalsa*) and *urs*, both these gatherings being religious in character. *Urs* is usually arranged at the *mazar* of a *Pir* (shrine of a Saint), and *milad* at any private house in the village.

On the occasion of *milad* and *urs*, professionals and other people well versed in Islamic theology deliver talks (*woaz*) on Islamic *shariat*. This *woaz* is delivered in the local dialect maintaining a rhyming pattern, and with frequent quotes from the Koran in Arabic and the inclusion of different well known Urdu and Persian proverbs. The speaker often translates, exemplifies and expatiates on quotations he has made. Sometimes elegant and highly erudite talks given by well trained people are pleasant to listen to and they create a deep effect on the minds of the listeners. The audience is not given a chance to become bored by incessant lecturing. They are encouraged to participate by way of reciting *darud*, *dowa*, etc. Thus in general, speeches in such gatherings are lively and immensely popular.

*Milad* is generally arranged within the courtyard of homes. This enables the women to maintain *purdah* while joining in as a silent audience. All villagers, including women, are invited by the organizer of a *milad*. Children also come and join. The women sit apart, guarded by a veil or a wall. They do not attend, and indeed are not invited, when a *milad* is held at a public place like the mosque.

The presence of women in a *milad* enables the professional Islamic theologians to widen considerably their network of communication, and carries their message from highly organized institutions like the madrasah down to the extremely parochial world of home and hearth.

During my stay in the village of Khiruli, *milad* was held four times. I attended three of these. One of the *milad* was arranged in 1968 by a widow and her sons on the fortieth day after the death of a son. On this occasion the *khatib* of the village presided and gave a talk emphasizing the duty of offering *qibla*. *sura* . 2, *ayat* . 43, 110, 117 and 277, *sura* . 4,

*ayat* . 162, *sura* . 5, *ayat* . 58, *sura* : 57, *ayat* . 18 and *sura* : 64, *ayat* . 16 and 17 of the Koran. During *milad*, learned Moslems find plenty of opportunities to urge people to follow the Islamic tradition. Thus, exhortation is given more weight by citing certain incidents that have happened locally or elsewhere, when the breaking of Islamic rules has apparently had unpleasant results. On such occasions, the congregation is put on the alert and made sharply aware by these professional practitioners of Islam as to how a faithful Moslem should react to un-Islamic ways, and to any deviation from the path of codified rules and laws which might possibly be resorted to for personal aggrandizement.

Of the four occasions of *milad* at Khiruli, two were arranged by two poor families. At the end of the *milad*, *sinmi* was distributed among the gathered assembly by the organizing family.

## Hajj

Before concluding this discourse on the sacred institutions of the Moslem, I would like to deal with one of the fundamental Islamic religious obligations for the rich Moslem (*i. e. maldar* in the local term), namely, the hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca. According to the prescribed rule of Islamic *shariat*, this is done during the twelfth month of *Zul-Hajj*.

Before going on a hajj, it is obligatory for a Moslem to be particular regarding different Islamic rules and duties, such as offering regular *namaz* five times a day and giving proper *fetra*, *zakat*, *wasar*, etc. Moreover, he should not be in debt. Usually, however, these rules are not strictly followed.

The Moslem who has accomplished a hajj is known as Hajji. A Hajji is highly esteemed by the Moslem in his area. There were a few such persons in the village around Khiruli, but none in Khiruli itself.

This detailed description of the sacred institutions of the Moslem shows us how the great tradition of Islam, originating in a distant place in Arabia, influences a band of people residing as a

minority in a Hindu dominated area of India. The most important point that emerges from this study is how this minority maintains their distinct tradition in the local context.

The whole content of the tradition of Islam is valid to Moslems in so far as it is codified in the Koran and the Hadith. This principle essentially protects the distinctive nature of the tradition from any deviation that might occur. It is, however, very difficult for the Moslem masses, as I observed in the area of study, to have any direct knowledge about their duties and practices from the erudite texts of the Koran and the Hadith alone. The sacred traditional institutions are essential for giving them an understanding of their duties and practices, and for maintaining the tradition. Even in the local context the institutions of mosque, *idgah*, *maktab*, madrasah, and the offices of the *khatib*, *maulavi* and other professional practitioners of Islam are highly organized. The officials trained in the centralized institution of the madrasah are the bearers of the doctrinal tradition of Islam. They instil it into the people and make their flock conscious followers of Islam. They are also the guardian angels of their flock. They keep a watchful eye over their followers to hold them within the limits of the codified rules of the religion. This helps to secure a general uniformity, resisting any deviation from the distinctive practices of their religion. In enforcing the tenets of Islam on its followers, the authorities, at times consciously and at other times unconsciously, make them aware of their distinct identity as followers of Islam by driving home the essential differences between their tradition and those of the neighbouring communities.

The institutions too maintain an efficient system of communication between the professionals and the laity. This system of communication is formally maintained through *woaz* and *khodba* delivered in the mosque and the *idgah*, or on the occasion of *milad*. The *maktab* and the madrasah greatly contribute to this system by training successive generations of professionals.

It should also be mentioned here that the congregational nature of the religion fosters community consciousness. They

find an essential sameness among themselves when they congregate for prayers especially on the day of *Jumma* or on the occasion of *Id*. The same feeling pervades them when they come together in a *milad*. Lastly, the pilgrimage to Mecca makes them conscious that the same thread runs through their world-wide religious community, despite differences in race, language and nationality.





# 4

*conclusion*



## Chapter 11

### Social and Cultural Boundaries and their Maintenance

This study on the Moslem mainly focusses on how a minority in possession of a great tradition confronts, in an agrarian setting, an engulfing majority which is guided by a *varna-jati* system of stratification and division of labour. While minorities with little traditions are quietly absorbed, this Moslem minority, being under the protection of a great tradition, has nevertheless been forced to eschew its ideal model of social organization, and suitably redefine its tenets to meet the demands of the situation.

I have endeavoured to spell out my field work experience mainly in terms of the plural situation of the area of study. The orientation of the study is towards an adequate comprehension of the process of identity and socio-cultural boundary maintenance by a religious community composed of a few social segments, situated in a plural social setting. To bring into relief the plural social system, the Moslem of Khiruli are introduced in relation to the neighbouring Hindu and tribal communities. This is done with special reference to the distinctive character of a plural society : a society integrated economically, "under the control of a state system dominated by one of the groups, but leaving large areas of cultural diversity in the religious and domestic sectors of activity" (Barth 1959a : 16). I have written about the economy of the area and discussed the regional pattern of stratification against the backdrop of Furnivall's clear depiction of the distinctive characteristics of a "plural" social system, *i.e.* "... .. the highest common factor of their wants [*i.e.* of the various sections of a plural society] is the economic factor" (Furnivall 1967 : 449).

From plurality, I have turned to the Moslem and tried to probe

deeply into the nature of their social stratification. I have attempted to decipher, especially in the context of Islamic egalitarianism, the social meaning of inequalities as observed in the course of the study of Moslem social stratification. The Moslem have segments like Hindu castes, and these are integrated economically into the Hindu caste-based division of labour, without participation in any other sector of social life. Unlike the Hindu castes, these segments among them are not assigned to a consistent *varna*-based model of hierarchy. Their intergroup stratification thus operates as an analogue of the Hindu caste system. They broadly follow among themselves a division analogous to the *Bhadralok* and *Chhotolok* clusters of castes. The upper cluster of social groups, the Sayyad, the Sheik, the Pathan and the Mogul, are grouped as a higher status category compared to the lower status Momin, Patua and Sah. In general the aspects of inequality among the various social segments evoke a sense of anomaly and embarrassment in the Moslem, who profess an egalitarian ideology. In order to resolve this dilemma, they either construct innovative social meanings to rationalize these inequalities or simply deny their existence. Such repudiation of caste-like segments is possible because, unlike the Hindu castes, these segments are scattered over a number of villages and do not in most respects function as corporate groups or concrete interacting structural units in the local Moslem villages. This particular condition of their social stratification confirms Marriott's (1960) two key logical stipulations - of numerical strength, and settlement pattern of social groups - for elaborate caste ranking (see also Bertocci 1976: 28 and 32).

I have already indicated that I observed a contrast between the ideal notion of society, which is in accord with Islamic texts, and its variant forms practised by its adherents in the local situation. The Moslem, under the constraint of this contrast, either repudiate the existence of the latter form, or rationalize its presence with an innovated set of rationales, which can conveniently be fitted to their Islamic tradition. I would like to emphasize that this innovative approach, as a way of maintaining social identity,

constitutes a positive attitude in the realm of boundary maintenance by a community. The community does not withdraw from a situation of interaction with a dominant neighbour for want of appropriate structural idioms; it rather tries to cleverly internalize the "alien" structural idioms required for such participation.

The rationalization of inequalities among the various Moslem social groups always serves the interest of the Moslem groups of higher status. A social group of lower rank generally refrains from making such rationalizations, preferring to speak only in terms of Islamic tenets of equality. In short it is the upper *jat*, economically privileged and politically powerful within their society, who constitute the force which makes a positive exertion in maintaining the organization of socio-cultural boundaries.

In the plural social system of my area of study, the Moslem are relatively better off as compared to the tribes. Some are prosperous and quite a few of them are engaged in keen competition with the Hindu to better their economic state. Although an economic enterprise is seemingly an individual effort, for its sustenance through generations it needs the tutelage of a larger group. In an agrarian social system, communities require to keep close contact, and maintain interaction among themselves, in order to successfully organize their production units. Thus the economically prosperous communities require stronger ties both within and outside their respective social boundaries, and thus forge new alignments.

However, to analyse this kind of situation we require a viewpoint that does not confuse cultural idioms with the presentation of self. In an organized social life, modes of interaction pertinent to a particular social situation are prescribed (Goffman 1959). Due to this, Moslems, especially the higher status groups who maintain relations with the dominant Hindu groups in sectors other than economic, need, for meaningful communication, to have caste (*jat*)-like structural prerequisites in their social system.

A study of social organization as prescribed in the tradition of Islam highlights the socio-culturally distinctive traits of Islam present among the Moslem of Khiruli and the neighbourhood. It

also highlights the process and mechanism of sustaining these traits. Particular attention has been given to the Moslem's evaluation of themselves in the local agrarian situation of Birbhum, in terms of their ideal or "ideological model" (Ward 1969 : 136), which consists of the Koranic and the Hadith texts. An endeavour has been made to clearly delineate how the native model (cf. Barth 1959b : 120) of Islam is kept functioning at the village level in West Bengal, in the context of the textual and codified model which the Moslem are required to follow. In this attempt, special care has been taken to bring into prominence the network of Islamic tradition and its constituent parts, and the working of the network in the organization of tradition.

In the multi-group area of study, the Moslem are primarily recognized as a distinct community through their religion and its manifestations at the level of social organization. Adherence of the Moslem to their religion and social system, in a simultaneously contrasting and dominant non-Moslem atmosphere, depends largely on the organization of the Islamic tradition and the associated self-perpetuating system. The Koranic texts preserve the whole content of the tradition and protect it against deviation from its ideal form. Moslems are made conscious of their tradition and are urged to remodel whatever derivative native model they might have to conform with the written texts of the Koran and the Hadith. The crucial role of the communicator is performed by a set of professionals trained in Islamic theology and jurisprudence. They are provided with formal and institutionalized facilities, such as seminaries (*madrasah*) for training themselves and their kind; institutionalized venues (*mosque*, *idgah*) and the formal occasions of *namaz*, *Jumma namaz*, *milad*, *jalsa*, *urs* for meeting the laity; and lastly formalized modes of presenting their messages through *khodba* and *woaz* to their clients. The adherents maintain the professionals, and take an active part in laying the infrastructure of facilities by which the latter meet and communicate with the Moslem masses. They achieve this through a socially sanctioned set of acts like *fetra*, *zakat*, *wasar*, *khairat*, and contributing towards

building and maintaining mosques. There is a general enthusiasm among them for arranging popular gatherings of *milad* and *jalsa*, constructing *idgah* and feeding *musalli*. The richer Moslem sections are found to have adequate means to take a more active part in performing these prescribed and generally acclaimed roles. By doing so, the rich enhance their prestige and social position. In order to maintain their status they are often ostentatious and over-enthusiastic in their performance of the said roles. Thus, on the one hand preceptors directly, and on the other hand the rich Moslem indirectly, through overplaying their roles, enjoin the general Moslem population not to be negligent in the matter of pursuing the Islamic tradition and to fall in line with the followers of Islam. The role of the preceptor is prescribed, while that of the wealthier sections is diffuse and follows from their class position. There are, however, forces cutting across boundaries of classes and equally influencing all Moslems to maintain their socio-cultural boundaries *vis-a-vis* other communities. These forces act mainly to make them conscious of their tradition and its practices, which in turn makes them further aware of their solidarity, both local and extralocal, or pan-Islamic. In the local context of Khiruli and its neighbouring area, the overt religio-social segregation of the Moslem delineates clearly, through the non-participation of other communities in their feasts and festivals, the boundaries that they construct through their endeavour to be exclusive and distinctive. In the overall cultural milieu of the caste system, the Hindu, in one sense, expect that the Moslem should follow their own cultural or rather "caste" norms correctly, as the latter in the local situation also expect that the Hindu castes should stick to their appropriate caste norms. However, the Moslem stop at the threshold of the *varna* model as applied to the local *jat* hierarchy. They consciously choose not to enter the hierarchy as they could have done, knowing fully well that at best they would have only added to the number of Hindu low castes and would have been completely subjected to the domination of the Hindu high castes. The majority of Hindu low castes in any case have no place in the

*varna* model, and the Moslem undoubtedly would have met the same fate. Instead, by taking up the role of a "competing intruder", they have devised an operational model to maintain a distinct identity that has stood the test of interaction in this plural society.



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